



Imagining Chinatown: Broken Blossoms (1919) in Britain

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ABSTRACT: Before the Second World War, the majority of London's modest Chinese population –consisting of approximately 900 people – resided in Limehouse, the East part of the city. The popular discourse saw Chinatown as synonymous with an exotic underworld filled with opium dens and exotic indulgences; a place where respectable Englishwomen were threatened by the lechery of Chinese men, and where less respectable Londoners could indulge in their vices. In this paper, I examine cultural texts that validated and reinforced the image of Limehouse as a place existing outside of Anglo-Saxon norms, where, to quote HV Morton, 'queer things happen in a mist of smoke.' Placing my focus on the ways in which Chinese community was represented in the popular media, I combine the analysis of *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *London* (1926) with the critical opinions expressed by film editors and contemporary movie-goers. I also investigate the threat of miscegenation, usually inherent to the representation of Limehouse in the popular press. *London Evening News*, for example, encouraged their readers to pity 'degraded' white women who fell for 'the Yellow Man.' In line with the 1920s' rhetoric of eugenics, other newspapers suggested that wives of immigrants living in London's Chinatown were declining physically – gradually acquiring Chinese-like features – and mentally, as a result of their morally transgressive behaviour. Was Limehouse represented in universally pejorative terms, and, if so, what kind of social forces made such narratives reverberate?

KEY WORDS: London; Chinatown; silent film; race; Limehouse; immigrants



Prior to the end of the Second World War, the majority of London's modest Chinese population was concentrated in the East, riverside district of Limehouse. The name of the impoverished area – home to sailors from Canton and Southern China – became a common shorthand for Chinatown, despite its mixed national and ethnic makeup: many residents were of Swedish, German, Danish, Italian or even of Russian descent (Seed 2005: 59). The popular discourse saw Limehouse as synonymous with an exotic underworld of opium dens and forbidden indulgences; a place where respectable Englishwomen were threatened by the lechery of Chinese men, and where not-so-respectable Londoners could succumb to their vices. In this paper, I use *Broken Blossoms* (1919) as a case study to examine the ways in which silent film reflected and reinforced the dominant image of this peripheral space as a place existing outside of Anglo-Saxon norms – or, ideologically, even beyond the capital itself – where, to quote H.V. Morton (1941: 335) “queer things happen in a mist of smoke”.

Although D.W. Griffith, the film's director, could not consciously draw on the discursive iconography of Limehouse constructed across print media in the United Kingdom, I argue that his creative reworking of the issues of gender and race was as identifiable to British audiences as it was to their American counterparts. To foreground my discussion, I will firstly inspect the depictions of Limehouse that flourished in British literature and popular press, stressing concerns significant to the diegesis of *Broken Blossoms*. Despite the existence of extensive scholarship on Griffith's output, limited attention has been paid to understanding his work within national milieus that would go beyond the filmmaker's native country (Simmon 1993; Gunning 1994; Mayer 2009). The most recent edited volume on Griffith (Keil ed. 2017) constitutes a notable exception to this trend. Here, I survey the intersection of British and American discourses on race. In bringing together the works of cultural historians and film scholars, such as Lucy Bland (2013) and John Burrows (2009), I investigate the ways in which racial ideology of 1920s Britain informed and added to available readings of the picture. Using textual analysis as a complimentary tool, this article attempts to uncover the links between Griffith's imagination and the British fantasies of Chinatown.

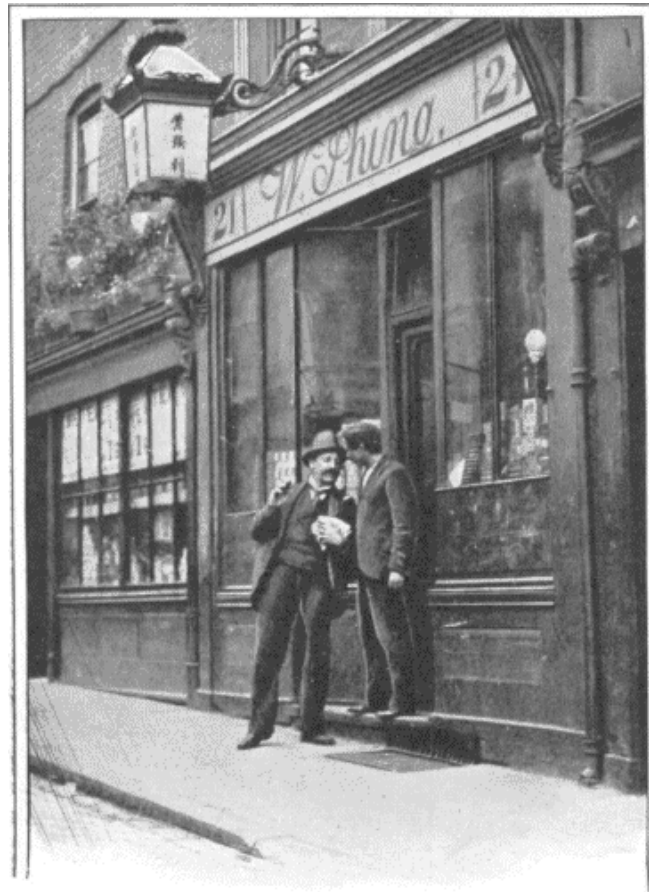
LIMEHOUSE IMAGINED

The origin of the image of Limehouse as a dark, mysterious landscape filled with smoke and secrets can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century. In the first chapter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Charles Dickens (1879: 219) popularised the symbolism of the opium smokehouses, accessible only through “narrow passages” and “devious ways”.



For Dickens, the Chinese settlement represented the “lowest stratum of the international hierarchy in the streets around the London docks” (Seed 62: 2006). Oscar Wilde’s (1908: 238) novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891) also employed the iconography of the quarter as drug and crime-infused; it is in Limehouse where Grey satisfies his hideous, gnawing hunger for opium. Wilde’s (1908: 237) opium den is equally, if not more menacing than the one envisioned by Dickens: an establishment where “one could buy oblivion”, as well as a place where “the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new.”

The vogue for Chinoiserie and Chinese-themes continued to gain momentum in the early 1900s, with the increasing popularity of pantomime and stage plays, namely *The Chinese Lantern* (1908), *Kismet* (1911), and *Chu Chin Chow* (1916) (Witchard 2009: 86). The latter play proved to be particularly successful with the audiences and critics alike, running continuously for nearly five years since its opening night in August 1916. Performed 2,238 times in total, this musical comedy broke box-office records in such an outstanding manner that they remained unchallenged for the next forty years. The concept of the Orient, connoting riches, decadence and opulence, was used to accommodate for the spectatorial desire for escapism by the London theatre owners. It also gave the playwrights the non-Western context in which to explore issues that would be otherwise too problematic to handle: overt sexuality and nudity was commonplace in *Chu Chin Chow*, set in both China and the so-called Middle East. To paraphrase Witchard (2009: 86), the broadly and rather loosely understood Orient provided an imagined space allowing for the interrogation of taboos of class, race and sexuality. I show that such ideological strategy was applicable to the cinematic visions of the East, specifically in relation to *Broken Blossoms*.



A CHINESE SHOP (LIMEHOUSE).

Figure 1. A Chinese shop in Limehouse in 1900. From *Living London*, edited by George R. Sims

One of the most influential forces in the propagation of images of the Chinese émigré was Thomas Burke, the freelance journalist and author of the best-selling collection of short stories set in Limehouse. Although largely overlooked nowadays (often to the advantage to his contemporary, Sax Rohmer) Burke achieved a great literary status during his lifetime. Indeed, he was nothing short of a celebrity, with none other than Charlie Chaplin (1922: 106-107) proudly recalling his meeting with Burke in the account of his travels around Europe. Burke's work often deployed a Chinese character Quong Lee as the narrator, which partially accounts for the fact that many of the author's contemporaries – including Chaplin – viewed *Limehouse Nights* (1916) as sympathetic in its portrayal of both the Chinese and the working-class, a reading which endured in the academic writing on the subject to this day (Richards 2017: 83). Interestingly, a British film magazine *Pictures and The Picturegoer* (1925: 8) compared



Chaplin's fight to portray the marginalised, "lowly ones" in *The Gold Rush* (1925), "a saga of poverty", to the efforts made previously in Burke's literary endeavours.

Paul Newland (2008: 111) evaluates Burke's stories as fictional texts that engage closely with the anxieties of the period, particularly those regarding "urban degeneration, immorality, imperial decline, miscegenation and the increased political and sexual freedom of women." He also points out that the tales often depicted Chinese as lacking control, and the mixed-race people as inferior (Newland 2008: 114-115). However, such interpretation is far from being universally accepted. Anne Witchard (2009: 171), for instance, is one of the scholars who defends *Limehouse Nights* against the charges of xenophobia, viewing the prose as a non-judgemental effort in capturing "the human melting pot of proletarian London and its traditional freedom and pleasures"; a series of observations that preserved their author "from the knee-jerk racism and fascist inclinations of high-cultural writers of the period." Witchard makes a case of juxtaposing Burke's fiction to that of Sax Rohmer, the man behind novels on Fu Manchu, published between 1914 and 1919. The Limehouse conceived by the former author is a set for the exploits of Manchu, an arch-criminal of ancient powers and a human incarnation of the yellow peril (Rohmer 1997: 13). The evil nature of Rohmer's stereotyped Chinese villains makes Burke's ideas "appear all the more remarkable" (Witchard 2013: 71). In a similar vein, Lucy Bland (2013: 80) sees Burke's Chinese characters as complex: men who are capable of being both unscrupulous addicts, but also kind and loving. In either case, Burke capitalised on the established notions of Chinatown, where – in the backrooms of teahouses – prostitution, drug trade and petty crime could flourish.

BRITISH POPULAR PRESS

As with many other cultural tropes, the reality of people living in Limehouse was far removed from the ways in which popular culture re-imagined and commodified it. To fully understand the ideological underpinnings of the representation of the neighbourhood during the silent film era, it is imperative to provide historical context penetrating to its foreign inhabitants. According to Jerry White (2002: 13), "from 1911 to 1921 Chinese presence in Britain had more than doubled, with the numbers in London had risen from 247 to 711." Although the figures quoted by the authorities should not be treated in absolute terms – the Chinese house-lodgers were often prosecuted for accommodating too many tenants, which increases the likelihood of providing the government with inaccurate information – it is notable that the statistics reported by the popular press were always much higher than those revealed by historical data. In October 1920, *Daily Mail* (1920: 7) claimed, for example, that there were over 4,000 Chinese living across the capital; such figure vastly exceeded the census estimate of 700.



The perception that Limehouse hosted all of the London's Chinese was, historically speaking, no less accurate than the exaggerated population data reported by the newspapers. Alan Palmer (2000: 108) writes that Chinese hailing from Canton tended to settle in Poplar, particularly around Pennyfields. The 1921 census indicates that Limehouse became a home to 337 individuals born in China; a rather small proportion considering the remaining 374 Chinese nationals living in various areas of the city. Indeed, statistical evidence suggests that the Chinese population of Limehouse never grew beyond 500 individuals (White 2002: 13-14). An already modest minority went through a further decline in the 1930s, as the passing of new law banned the signing of Chinese sailors in a British port (Glinert 2000: 257).

According to Ruth Meyer (2011: 18), the early twentieth century imagined Chinatown as self-contained and inescapable, even more so than other "ethnic quarters." Yet, the idea that an Asian individual is less likely to assimilate, adapt to the Anglo-Saxon standards than a European émigré was not the only reason underpinning the perception of Chinatown as especially problematic. What made the Chinese population stand out amongst other immigrant groups living in London at the time, was the fact that it was almost entirely male; in that sense, the predominantly male-cast of *Broken Blossoms* was reflective of that reality. The vast majority of the Chinese were seamen who relocated to the capital due to either shipping of soldiery (Bland 2013: 70). Such outstanding gender-makeup is crucial in fostering one's understanding of the xenophobic fears triggered by Chinese presence in the Anglo-Saxon consciousness, meaning that the dangers associated with Limehouse were tied closely to the threats posed by non-white masculinity. The social construct of white (and therefore ideal) manhood relates to the physical stamina, heroism and most importantly, the ability to repress urges seen as inherently masculine, that is to control one's desire for the opposite sex. Richard Dyer (1997: 28) investigates how, in the realm of Western culture, the white man is a universal subject carrying "dark drives against which to struggle" and whose subsequent ability to self-regulate is seen as a marker of his whiteness. In keeping with such ideological perspective, Chinese men were presented as inferior to English men not because they had no "masculine needs" – on the contrary, they were assumed to live in the heterotopia of sex, drugs and violence – but because, being non-whites, they lacked the moral code and skill necessary to fight them.

The first waves of unrest washed over the district in 1912 (5). The year 1919 also witnessed an increasing level of racist violence aimed at the Chinese community, in what was soon to be categorised by the press as a series of race riots. Reporting on violence in Poplar – a group of white men attacking two Chinese men in their dwellings and sexually assaulting their British wives – *The Daily Herald* (1919: 2) concluded that "Prejudice against mixed marriages was perhaps a contributing factor, but it seems clear that the housing problem plays a most important part in stirring up local feeling." *The Sunday Express* noted that the jealousy of white men over white women lay at the core of such attacks, adding that it is understandable one would take issue with interracial



relationships: “It is *naturally* offensive to us that coloured men should consort with even the *lowest* of white women. Racial antipathy is always present, the sex jealousy inflames it to a violent, unreasoning wave of emotion” (Cited in Bland 2013: 71). The riverside districts experienced a shortage of housing, and the swirling rumour that a British soldier was refused tenancy certainly added to the ferocity of xenophobic sentiments. If Limehouse featured on the pages of contemporary newspapers, it was usually in relation to drug scandals and gambling; police raids on opium dens were described in detail by *The Globe* in January of 1919 (9); in October (1919:2) of the same year, the publication reported on Chinese-run smokehouses in Liverpool (Figure 2).

The media interest in London’s Chinatown peaked during the Great War, as a series of scandals brought Limehouse to the national attention. The first bout of outrage took place in December of 1918, with the sensational accounts pertaining to the sudden death of Billie Carleton, a rising star of the West End (White 2002: 114). A popular performer, Carleton was found dead in her Savoy Hotel suite the morning after she attended a lavish celebration at the Royal Albert Hall, which lasted into the small hours (1918: 3; 1918: 10). She was only 22 years old. The inquest decided the untimely death was a result of cocaine poisoning. Further reports incriminated Ada Lo Ping Yu, (1918: 4) a Scottish woman married to a Chinese man, who was subsequently sentenced to five months in Holloway prison with hard labour for supplying the actress with the fatal dose of the drug. As explored by Bland (2013: 69), the media’s handling of the event emphasised the link between the Chinese underworld and white women who, lured to Limehouse by both thrills and financial profits offered by the opium trade, fell victim to its hazards. Even though Carleton operated in a milieu where drug taking was commonplace, and despite her problematic positioning against the moral code of the period – she was a mistress of a much older man – the publicity surrounding her death maintained her innocence.



Figure 2. Illustration depicting a 'luxurious' opium den, provided by the *Illustrated Police News* (July 12, 1923)

Another outcry accompanied the death of Freda Kempton, a nightclub dancer and a hostess only a year younger than Carleton at the time of her death, in March 1922 (1922: 5). The public interest in Carleton's case had hardly subsided, which heightened the challenges posed by the new case. Just like Carleton, Kempton died of cocaine overdose. The inquest to the demise revealed that the victim spent some time in Limehouse on the tragic night and, what is more, that she was visited by a group of Chinese men only a couple of days before the incident. A Chinese restaurateur known as Brilliant 'Billy' Chang was implicated, although no legal charges were made (1922: 10; 1922: 11; see also 2006: 71). Chang's involvement in the case as both Kempton's drug supplier (1922: 14) and an alleged lover fuelled the narratives of "white slavery", confirming what the public knew all along: Chinese men prey on inexperienced, young women, luring them to their doom.



Both scandals cemented the widely held notion that the peddling of drugs was the chief occupation for the Chinese, who not only smuggled heroin and cocaine, but also stored it in the docks, subsequently staying in charge of its distribution in the clubs of West End. A headline run by *The Daily Express* (Cited in Burrows 2006: 70) warned its readers of a 'powerful, if mysterious' Chinese syndicate operating in the East End. These and many more shocking news stories sustained the notion that the moral decay of the city can be blamed on the imagined group of outsiders. It also supported the construction of Limehouse as built on essentially non-English terrain, regardless of geography. For the imperial logic, the othered community of London's Chinatown was a threat, if only an imaginary one, chiefly because it resided at the very epicentre of the Empire, offering illicit attractions to English women. The principal element of the moral panic accompanying opium was to present female drug users as innocent victims of the foreign influence. Marek Kohn (2001: 57) indicates that it was not the Chinese penchant for gambling and opium that perturbed the British, but their perceived ability to appeal to white women. "The dangers of the other vices were seen to lie mainly in [the] capacity [of Chinese men] to aid seduction across the racial divide. . .", he suggests (Kohn 2001: 57).

The photographs of Limehouse from the period in question convey a rather mundane picture of the poverty stricken, drab area, certainly devoid of the sinister glamour and danger intrinsic to the Chinatown painted so eagerly by novels, plays and songs alike. How could one marry the impoverished reality of Limehouse with the alterative world it allegedly stood for, at least according to the iconography which endured in popular culture? Jeffrey Richards (2017: 81) suggests that one way to uphold the myth was to represent Chinatown as making active efforts to conceal its true nature, and to explain the unremarkable looks of the district as nothing more than a surface; a façade hiding a forbidden, yet exciting realm. The construction of the 'real' Chinese quarter as a deeply hidden prevailed on the pages of the daily press, with columns convincing their readership of the existence of Limehouse that is both within yet outside of London.

BROKEN BLOSSOMS (1919)

Released in the United Kingdom in February 1920, the story of *Broken Blossoms* expressed certain fears of Otherness, encapsulated by both foreign influence and working-class menace. Although the film was produced and directed in the United States – a country with a Chinese population larger than that of United Kingdom – its chief themes were easily identifiable in Britain, where ideologies of white supremacy, imperialism and institutionalised racism created a language which spoke to the racial assumptions promulgated in Griffith's work. Richards' (1997: 330) remark that Griffith incorporated Dickensian elements into the plot contrivances of *Broken Blossoms*, *Way*



Down East (1920) and *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) might also clarify why the film resonated with the British psyche. Cultural commonalities are emphasised by the film's source, Burke's short story "The Chink and The Child", as well as the positive nature of its critical reception in both countries. Instantly acclaimed as superior to the standard movie fare, due to its "superlatively fine acting" and "intensely moving" storytelling (1920: XII), *Broken Blossoms* also impressed British critics with its heartrending closure, which offered variation from the straightforward 'happy ending' that dominated most productions at the time (M.A.L 1919: 5). In focusing on the film's unusual conclusion, local publicity replicated promotional dynamics set in motion in America, where fan magazines promised moviegoers "a fine handling of a relentless tragedy" (1919: 46). Griffith himself admitted he was determined to create a narrative that will not reiterate the existing model of characters ultimately finding happiness and requited love; instead, he strove for a "purposely tragic" story (2012: 111).

The action follows Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), a gentle monk who decides to travel to London to spread Buddha's message of peace amongst the "barbarous Anglo-Saxons." Disheartened by his lack of success, he opts for a decent, if not lonely life as a shopkeeper. "The Yellow Man's youthful dreams came to wreck against the sordid realities of life", proclaims one of the intertitles. The negative impact of East End's environment on the hero's moral code is evident; it is in Limehouse and not in his native country where Cheng starts to frequent opium dens. In the end, the brutality of the new surroundings forces him, a Buddhist, to "take up a gun" (Watts 2002: 35). Elise Codd (1919: 3) of *The Picture Show* noted that the part marked a new direction for Barthelmess, known predominantly for the roles of eloquent and wealthy youths, predicting it will elevate him to great heights: "he has triumphed in a part that few actors many years his senior would dare attempt" (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Photographs of Barthelmess and Gish from British fan magazines. From the left: *The Picture Show* (20th September 1919) and the poster featured in the same title on 9th of May 1920

Broken Blossoms develops a parallel narrative of Lucy (Lilian Gish), an English girl abused by her violent father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). Not unlike Cheng, frail and childlike Lucy is a victim of her circumstances. Her tragic position comes to the forefront in the scene in which one acquaintance warns her against marriage and the drudgery of housewifery it brings; we see how, in another encounter, Lucy is cautioned against the dangers of sex work by two prostitutes – or “ladies of the street”, as the film refers to them. Thus, the narrative highlights the hardships a young girl would have to endure to escape her dire reality (Ebert 2000). The two plots intertwine when Lucy stumbles into Cheng’s shop after a particularly savage beating on the hands of her father. Still a monk, the owner takes pity on her, allowing Lucy to take refuge in his abode. Although the man treats his guest with kindness and affection she has never experienced before, nursing Lucy back to health in a room he decorated with silks, he also subjugates her to his whims.



The working-class heroine is stripped of agency in both of her relationships with men. For her father and tormentor, she is little more than a slave. For Cheng, Lucy epitomises the opposite end of the spectrum: a pure, idealised spectacle; “a white blossom” to which he tends to with special care. Dressed up, adored by exotic fabrics and admired with intensity verging on worship, Lucy resembles a doll rather than a human being. The tragedy hanging over the story becomes imminent when Lucy’s father learns about his daughters’ whereabouts. In the eyes of Battling Burrows, who hated those “not born in the same great country as himself”, his daughter has committed an abominable offence by associating herself with an Asian man. Given the interplay of racial and gender considerations, the ensuing murder can be classified as an honour killing; after all, the perpetrator is convinced that Lucy violated dominant mores of conduct and uses physical violence to control her. In fact, such reading was signalled by an American journalist who referred to Burrows as a man avenging “his family and racial honor [sic]” (1919: 47).



Figure 4. British promotional material for *Broken Blossoms*.



For the most part, Griffith's cinematic interpretation follows Burke's work rather closely, going as far as to use direct quotes from the source in the intertitles. Yet the changes made by the director in the adaptation are telling. For example, Lucy is introduced to the plot as a 15-year old instead of a 12-year old, most likely in an attempt to "lessen the potential paedophilic overtones of the tale" (Richards 2017: 85). Griffith goes to greater lengths to portray the relationship between the Chinese protagonist and Lucy as a strictly platonic affair, "a pure and a holy thing." Such reading is further emphasised by Cheng's heightened status as a Buddhist preacher, whereas his literary predecessor is no more than a vagabond and a wandering loafer (1916: 18-19). On another level, the religious beliefs of the chief protagonist underline his incompatibility with the principles of whiteness, which are tight closely to Christian supremacy. His missionary plan fails, foreshadowing his failure to "get the girl" (Suh 2015: 33).

For some film scholars, for example Sarah Projansky (2001: 71-73), the film's dismissal of illicit sexual desire is not straightforward, as it tantalised its audiences with innuendo and the possibility of 'exotic sex', intercut with moralising messages. Paradoxically, the moving picture and its advertising maintained the right balance between touching upon interracial taboos and dismissing them; a contradiction evoked in *The Picture Show's* reference to Cheng as Gish's "great Chinese lover" (1919: 3). The scene in which the man looks at Lucy with fondness and attempts to kiss her – ending up kissing her robe instead (Luther, Ringer Lepre and Clark 2018: 122) – is a more explicit instance of such strategic negotiation. Additionally, the historical context surrounding the production of *Broken Blossoms* complicates the nature of its chief relationship, especially in the light of widespread stereotype that saw Chinese men as attracted to teenage girls at best, and pre-pubescent children at worst. In 1922, *The Times* published the testimony of Lilly Sidall, who admitted that during her years in the laundry business run by the Chinese she has learnt about their desires for "a spring chicken – a buxom girl of 10 or 11" (Cited in Bland 2013: 73).

MISCEGENATION AND RACE

Many film historians have pointed out that the narrative conceived by Burke and adapted to screen by Griffith is a thinly veiled allegory of inter-racial romance (Marchetti 1993: 37; Greene 2014: 21). Robert G. Lee (1999: 129) goes further in noting that the work is a play on three taboos: miscegenation, incest and paedophilia. Although the love Cheng has for Lucy is prohibited and unrequited, chiefly because of its racial optics, it affirms the universal desirability and superiority of white women amongst all other races.



Figure 5. Lilian Gish as Lucy, a Victorian woman-child, looking at her doll

The intended power held by Lucy as a signifier of gendered whiteness, is signalled by one of the film's intertitles, which refers to her as an "alabaster cockney girl." Her representation of femininity is related to the Victorian child-woman, a young female "with tear-aged-face", still childish enough to play with her doll (Figure 5).

Casting of Gish, one of Griffith's frequent collaborators, as a neglected, adolescent gutter-waif brought extratextual layers of meaning to the picture. On one hand, Gish's image reinforced Lucy's as the embodiment of child-like naivety; after all, the star was rising to fame due to her acclaimed portrayals of juvenized females in need of saving in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) and was, at the time, already familiar to English cinemagoers (1920: 10). Gish's commodified girlhood accounts for the fact she was chosen to perform as character ten years her junior, although it complicated the pleasures of the viewing experience. To paraphrase from Gaylyn Studlar's (2013: 49) theorisation of another role, while Lucy intended to stand for innocence she simultaneously became "implicated in a sexualized [sic] gaze fixed on the screen fiction of the girl-child played by a woman." The bespoke status as a girl-child comes to full view in *The Picture Show*, where Gish is described as "a little star [...] so appealing, so childishly helpless, you just long to comfort her" (Codd 1920: 3). Thus, Gish's performative presence heightened the potential emotional impact of *Broken Blossoms* for both British and American spectators. Looking back at Gish's career in 1921, British fan magazine *The Picturegoer* explained that many of her most tragic screen moments were not faked because the actress was willing to risk her own life in order to achieve the most satisfying artistic effect (1921: 23).



The interview seems to further contribute to the blurring of on and off-screen tensions, in quoting Gish as being “truly frightened” of her co-star, Donald Crisp, during the filming of the Limehouse melodrama; “[I] was not sorry when it was over” (1921: 22), she asserted.

As with Burke’s work, academic evaluations of the film differ when it comes to its racial representation. Comparing *Broken Blossoms* to Griffith’s *oeuvre* to date – specifically to the blatant racism of *The Birth of a Nation* – Michael Rogin (1988: 233) considers it to be a departure from politically-charged topics, and the director’s retreat into melodrama. Unlike the screen epics of 1915 and 1916 that granted Griffith international praise, this small-scale picture had no qualms in becoming the biggest, most lavish screen production ever seen (F.D. 1915: 501). Likewise, it contrasted the patterns set in the previous films in placing the viewer’s identification with the weak and marginalised. *Broken Blossoms*’ intimate, artistic nature caused Adolph Zukor, a powerful producer, to reject the project out of anticipation it will not be commercially viable; doubts which, it has to be noted, proved wrong, with the film proving box-office success (Oderman 2000: 85).

Given the severely limited representations of Chinese masculinity in Western vernacular, restricted largely to two essential images: that of an evil, lecherous man with semi-magical powers (based, to some degree, on the character of Fu Manchu) and that of an asexual monk (Kohn 2001, 128–131), *Broken Blossoms* offers a more nuanced, and perhaps more well-meaning portrayal. Although the film did not match the highly moralising tone assumed by the popular press – indeed, it depicts the relationship between a Chinese man and white female as far from predatory – it is not to say that the feature managed to rise above the racial attitudes of its times. In many ways, Griffith’s treatment of the ‘Yellow Man’, as Cheng is often referred to by the intertitles, appears painfully dated to the contemporary viewer. Many jarring uses of the pejorative term “Chink”, used even by Lucy in conversation to Cheng (“What makes you so good to me Chinky?”), pales in comparison to the casting of a Caucasian actor in the role of a Chinese immigrant.

Putting the racist implications of ‘Yellowface’ aside, Cheng’s role as a positive type is apparent through juxtaposition to the film’s villain, a vicious prize-fighter. At one point, Lucy is observed by an ominous Chinese called Evil Eye (Edward Peil Sr.), which again underlines the purity of Cheng’s own intentions. What complicates the characterisation of Cheng as a hero, however, is his apparent feminization. This is articulated through his hunched posture (Figure 6), which to an extent, mimics Lucy’s – they both carry the weight of the world on their shoulders – as well as through the aesthetic framing of his figure with soft backlighting, a choice traditionally reserved for women in classical Hollywood. Cheng seems ethereal and almost glowing.



Figure 6. Two shots depicting the confrontations between 'The Yellow Man', Cheng Huan, and Battling Burrows

The ending of *Broken Blossoms* diverges from the standard, melodramatic formula of the rescue, marking Cheng's inability to save Lucy from her oppressor. The scene showing Lilian Gish's character trying to escape her furious father by hiding in the wardrobe is intercut with the image of Cheng in his room, holding the gown she wore in despair. At that moment, both characters appear equally helpless. When the protagonist realises the danger Lucy is in, running to save her, he arrives too late, only to discover her lifeless on the bed. Cheng's only choice is to avenge her death which he achieves by shooting Burrows; he then carries Lucy's body through the misty streets back to his living quarters where he performs a religious ritual, before committing suicide.



The desperate act is not devoid of sacrificial undertones, with Cheng choosing to take his life by stabbing himself, in a room that once housed Lucy and, as such, became a shrine to her. Gina Marchetti (1993: 37) argues that Cheng's death is a necessity so the narrative can conclude in a fashion that does not defy the moral codes of the decade; by failing to help the object of his desires, he fails to fulfil the expectations of a romantic, heteronormative hero, therefore reassuming "emasculated, masochistic role of an Asian man in Hollywood" (Marchetti 1993: 37). The conspicuous opposition between the representations of the film's lead and the figure of a sadistic father, a clear-cut melodramatic antagonist, was problematic to some. By contrast, 'The Yellow Man's concern for Lucy framed him as a positive figure. It is easy to see how this reversal of racial categorisations could attract criticism. In fact, one female cinema-goer had contacted London City Council, expressing her perturbation at the fact that the picture gives "a very bad impression of the British male parent" and of the East End working class more generally. What concerned the spectator even further was what she saw as a glorification of the Chinese masculinity, which she thought of as potentially harmful to the naïve, female movie fans. "What I fear is that young girls may be attracted by the chivalrous Chinaman who worshipped the white girl and did not exact any return of his devotion" (Gardiner 1920). What needs outlining, however, is the notion of class, often integral to the constructions of race. Ultimately, the fantasies of Limehouse were formed, and endlessly propagated by, the tastes of bourgeois, middle-class public (Projansky 2001: 72; Newland 2008: 108), whose knowledge of working-class London was limited, if not simply non-existent; Griffith was of course no exception. The issue of ownership of images is relevant here, because Battling Burrows cannot embody the Anglo-Saxon normativity, for he lives on the margins of respectable society. His incompetent speech ("I'll learn her!") as well as cockney accent ("yer", "wot"), are conveyed in the intertitles through various misspellings, functioning to emphasise Burrows' otherness. In light of this interpretive strategy, Cheng's foreign status does not serve to enhance the normality of the white character, because said character is simultaneously marked as different from societal standards. British audiences were more likely to read the ideological positions of Cheng and Burrows as aligned, specifically because, unlike the United States, the country did not face a significant influx of non-white migrants. In the lack of direct economic competition from Asians, the boundaries between the white lower classes and their racially-othered counterparts retained their flexibility (Koshy 2001: 71).

One of the ways in which the film conversed with the dominant anxieties regarding Limehouse and its inhabitants was its depiction of a "scarlet house of sin" where the "Chinese, Malays and Lascars" smoke opium, accompanied by white women. The editing moves from a medium-shot of a woman sitting next to an Arab man to an aesthetically similar image showing another young female conversing with a black man, depicted by an actor in blackface (Figure 7).



Figure 7. White women and non-white men, depicted in *Broken Blossoms*.

The following wide shots captures the clients of this establishment, with a languishing, laughing woman at the centre of the composition. We then see her in close-up, as she closes her eyes, evoking a drug-induced trance. Placing young, presumably English women in such treacherous environment reflects the fear of miscegenation and is even more revealing in the complete absence of white men. Consequently, the sequence evokes a virulent belief that non-white immigrants constitute a threat to the white civilization, whether the peril they carry is a sexual threat or moral corruption (Koshy 2001: 52).



Such ideological signalling –Asian men are connected to drugs and moral downfall of white women– would have been easy to interpret by modern audiences, acquainted with the press reports of drug subculture, which usually coupled gender and racial concerns. As evidenced by the discussions of Carleton and Kempton’s scandals mentioned before, the press of the late 1910s and early 1920s occupied itself with the alleged dangers waiting for female Londoners in Chinatown, cautioning against the drugs and interracial sex, both of which were presented, similarly to Griffith’s feature, as integral to each other. In charting the cultural history of drug wars, Susan C. Boyd argues that these ideas gained currency between 1914 and mid-1920 not only in Britain, but also in Canada and the United States. “It is a Duty of every Englishmen and Englishwoman to know the truth about the degradation of young white girls in this plague of the Metropolis – IT MUST BE STOPPED” proclaimed *London Evening News* under a sensational headline “White Girls Hypnotised by Yellow Men” (1920: 1). The same article encouraged their readers to pity ‘degraded’ white women who fell for the benevolent spell of the Chinamen. In line with the logic of eugenics, the June 1919 issue of *Western Mail* asserted that mixed-race couples are “repugnant to all our finer instincts” (Cited in Bland 2013: 80). Other newspapers suggested that wives of immigrants living in London’s Chinatown were declining physically – gradually acquiring Chinese-like features – and mentally, presumably as punishment for their morally transgressive behaviour (Ibid).

Symptoms of Sinophobia are present in the accounts pertaining to Chinese settlers across the Ocean, showing how multiple strategies that vilified Asian men were transnational in character, at least in the West. One poignant example comes in the form of a provocatively titled news report “Chink Seeks to Promote Promiscuity” whose author claimed that the leaders of Canadian National Chinese League encouraged intermarriage between white women and their countrymen (1919: 6). In the absence of any other discussion of sexual behaviour, one must discern it is the notion of racially heterogenous relationships that is considered ‘promiscuous’ here. A lengthy feature printed in *The Austin American* implied that Chinese men would desire to either buy or capture white women into slavery, which was ‘the lust of every Chink in America, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise!’ (Lait 1922: 29).



Figure 8. The 'real' Chinatown vs. Chinatown imagined: Pennyfields in the 1920s and the set of *Broken Blossoms*

Another device connecting *Broken Blossoms* with the established representational templates is the film's depiction of Limehouse as existing somehow outside of London, understood as a vivid, cosmopolitan centre. This comes across particularly strongly in the set design depicting the haphazard, riverside dwellings of Battling Burrows and his teenage daughter. The squalor of the small, no-window apartment mobilizes the Victorian imagery of the locale, with its "wretched rooms in the most wretched all of the houses" and omnipresent filth (Archer 1865: 134). The evidence provided by film periodicals indicates that such representation was easily recognisable and viewed as authentic by some. The reviewer of *The Daily Herald* (1920: 8) wrote:



as I don't know Limehouse as intimately as I should like, I am quite prepared to believe that Mr. Griffith's idea of the district (built up in American studios, of course) is quite the real thing. Anyhow, the people are pretty convincingly real – Chinks and Lascars and Bruisers against a backdrop of opium and squalor.

Not all commentators shared the same entrusted outlook. *The Times* saw the film's locations as "a Limehouse which neither Mr. Burke nor any other man who knows his East-end of London will be able to recognise", simultaneously articulating how this vision – "a very good impression of an American's producer's idea of Limehouse – is a fantasy of Chinatown and 'nothing more," which allegedly places it beyond reproach (1920: 10). Built as part of the big indoor stage by Griffith's chief carpenter, Frank Wortman, the set representing the centre of the social life in Limehouse does not conform to an image of a bustling metropolis. As Lucy runs back and forth between her sordid home and Cheng's living quarters, she is shown in a small courtyard surrounded by shops (Figure 8), a landscape which looks pre-industrial, as it bears no signs of modernity: there are no automobiles, advertising signs, horse carriages or any other artefacts that would reveal the geographical setting or historical specificity in which the story is set. This is even more striking when grounded in the examination of the historical photographs of the locale, which – although suffering from poverty – is decidedly recognisable as urban. Whilst London of the 1910s and 1920s is synonymous with transparency, speed, big open spaces and control, Chinatown connotes the contrasting notions, such as obstruction, stillness and chaos.

CONCLUSION

Rising gradually since the 1890s, the notoriety of London's Chinatown catapulted to phenomenal heights after the publication of *Limehouse Nights* in 1916. My survey of the British print media shows that throughout the 1910s and early 1920s, Chinese men became associated more strongly with drug scandals and, subsequently, with moral degradation of the female city-dweller. Underpinned by the spectre of interracial sex, this imagery reflected common, gendered insecurities, which also promulgated through American literature and press. Although I recognise the limitations of my usage of textual analysis – more research into the actual responses of British audiences to the film would be needed – I believe this article produces an insight into the historical discourses of Chinese-ness. What it implies is that in building on and conflating anxieties relating to a wide range of Others, *Broken Blossoms* became especially pertinent to contemporary, middle-class Londoners. Despite the fact the numbers of the Chinese occupants in the English capital were scarce, the dangers they carried, at least in the eyes of the British public, were not; according to Witchard (2013: 71), "the myth of Chinese Limehouse was always far greater than its actuality." Their very presence at the heart of the Empire – or,



“the portals of the West”, to quote from *Broken Blossoms* – destabilised the concept of an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous nation. Most importantly though, the cohabitation of white women with Chinese men was seen as damaging to the internalised hierarchies of race. Such fears structured the plot of Griffith’s feature, in which the central character’s sensibility, which firstly urges him to take up a missionizing effort in the West and secondly, to lavish his affection on Lucy, also makes him an ineffective saviour. His failure to popularise Buddhism is matched by his inability to meet the standards of the classical (white) Hollywood hero.

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