



WHAT'S IN A CHINESE ROOM? 20TH CENTURY CHINOISERIE, MODERNITY AND FEMININITY

The first three decades of the 20th century saw a rich resurgence of chinoiserie in popular and elite design in Europe and America. Flower and butterfly motifs, lacquered furniture, red tassels and key patterns emerged as colourful and exotic aspects of British modernity that, in many ways, took its inspiration directly from the Chinese styles of the 18th century. Chinese dragons danced across the cushions, curtains and wallpapers of British drawing rooms, and fashionable women sported Chinese coats and even Chinese hairstyles. But this was a strangely paradoxical trend, quite distinct from anything that had gone before.

Chineseness was associated with femininity and modernity. As Western culture experienced the social upheaval of World War I and the excitement of the Jazz Age which followed, chinoiserie was linked with wealthy stylish women, and with new locations of mass entertainment, such as cinemas. However, Chinese styles were also influential within the design movement of Modernism, where fashionable 'femininity' was eschewed in favour of a stripped-back 'masculine' look. Lastly, Chinese design was seen as a style legacy of the 18th century, so that 20th century chinoiserie was greatly nostalgic for the supposed grace and elegance of British 18th century aristocratic living. However, interest in Chinese things also preserved some powerfully exotic myths about China's past at a time when Chinese society was being transformed from a land of emperors and pagodas to a modern, westernised republic. The word 'chinoiserie' describes something which has been authored in the West but which represents China. The celebration of Chinese themes in 20th century British interiors, whether they used Chinese or non-Chinese made objects, were themselves a piece of chinoiserie that created potent fantasies of China past and present.

The Wickedness of the 1920s Chinese Room

The Orient tends to be used as a site of the irrational and of desire – an enigmatic place outside history and modernity which supplies a satisfying sensuality not found in industrialised Western society.¹ In fiction, women who possess oriental interiors are often seductive and act counter to the interests of 'civilised' society.² The fourth book in John Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga, *The White Monkey* (1924), presents the character of Fleur as uncompromisingly modern and extremely fashionable. Galsworthy gives us a description of her architect-designed Westminster home, featuring a Chinese drawing room in an intriguing combination of ancient and modern:

Fig 6.3 *Queen Mary's Chinese Chippendale Room*, oil painting by Richard Jack, 1927
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*'The room to the left of the front door, running the breadth of the house, was Chinese, with ivory panels, a copper floor, central heating, and cut-glass lustres. It contained four pictures – all Chinese – the only school in which her father had not yet dabbled. The fireplace, wide and open, had Chinese dogs with Chinese tiles for them to stand on. The silk was chiefly of jade-green. There were two wonderful old black tea-chests, picked up with Soames's money at Jobson's – not a bargain. There was no piano, partly because pianos were too uncompromisingly occidental, and partly because it would have taken up much room ... The light, admitted by windows at both ends, was unfortunately not Chinese.'*³

In this room Fleur also used a chinoiserie footstool and a red lacquered tea table, and she used one of the lacquered chests to hide the telephone, in line with contemporary design advice to disguise the mechanical. During the early 1920s, department stores such as Liberty were selling box-shaped pouffes with sprung seats covered in a variety of chinoiserie damasks and brocades, that opened up to reveal a hidden storage compartment specifically for gramophone records.⁴ Fleur also kept a Pekingese dog, a new, extremely fashionable and overtly Chinese pet, which was seen to 'round the room off' nicely.⁵

As a narrative device, the Chinese drawing room signals a domestic disturbance. Fleur has never loved her husband, and constantly teeters on the brink of an affair. By the next novel in the saga, Fleur has become an apparently dutiful young mother, and the Chinese room undergoes a similar transformation into a Louis Quinze room in gold and silver, complete with clavichord; the Pekingese dog is replaced by a Dandie Dinmont terrier.⁶ Possession of a Chinese drawing room therefore calls into question a wife's ability to maintain a spiritually fulfilling and respectable family home.⁷

A decent and well-mannered home would certainly have been at odds with the self-indulgence associated with oriental things. Indeed, according to one home advice book, *Good Manners* (1924), a Chinese room gives 'an impression of wickedness'.⁸ The 1920s American film star, Clara Bow, created a Chinese room that was a symbol of her own exciting immorality, with walls decorated in red, gold and black lacquer, red and gold oriental draperies, a large red and gold sofa, Chinese carpets, cabinets and lamps, and a lacquered Buddha on a carved stand. She excluded natural light, burned incense and referred to the room as 'a *loving* room, not a living room', encouraging her public to view her Chinese room as a den of iniquity, and constructing herself as a thoroughly liberated woman.⁹

Studies of fictional representations of late 19th and early 20th century Chinatowns in Britain and North America have demonstrated that the involvement of white women with Chinese men, and Chinese culture, was frequently the catalyst for the moralistic condemnation of Chinese practices that had hitherto been tolerated, such as illegal gambling.¹⁰ Sax Rohmer's novels *The Yellow Claw* (1915) and *Dope* (1919) depicted the downfall of drug-addicted white women in London's Chinatown at Limehouse, partly inspired



Fig 6.1. Evening pyjama outfit in blue silk satin embroidered with white dragons, c.1925. Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove

by the real-life scandal caused by the death of the actress Billie Carlton in 1918, in which Limchouse Chinese were implicated as drug suppliers.¹¹ *Dope* featured the Chinatown adventures of Rita Dresden, a drug-addicted actress, in the company of Molly Gretna, 'notorious society divorcée, foremost in the van of every craze, a past-mistress of the strangest vices' for whom the mere sight of Chinese people was 'deliciously sinful'.¹² Such negative reactions to fashionable women and Chinese things were widely found in the popular culture of the time, and perhaps it was precisely because of the subversive nature of Chinese things that chinoiserie successfully became a part of defiant modern femininities, focused on a new generation of increasingly independent women who smoked, wore make-up, bobbed their hair and sought access to higher education, professional training, and the vote.

The Book of the Home recommended a 'Chinese' room for expressing individuality, using a 'striking paper designed after the manner of red lacquer, or one bepatterned in oranges or adorned with birds of paradise ... in panel form'.¹³ Chinese dragon motifs were considered even more daring.¹⁴ Drawing rooms were often considered as a 'becoming' and 'admirable background' for a hostess, so that interior decoration and dress fashions were interconnected.¹⁵ Fashionable clothing was being sold within a 'lifestyle' package,¹⁶ and so the daring dragons of the 'Chinese' room transferred easily to the latest pyjama lounging outfits, dresses, evening gowns and coats (fig 6.1).¹⁷

Chinese dress had had an influence on Western fashions from just after 1900, with the emergence of Chinese coat designs. The main characteristic of the Chinese coat was its wide sleeves and armholes, which were cut in one piece with the body of the garment. As well as Chinese evening coats, and even Chinese motor coats, Chinese tea gowns and dressing gowns appeared, and such designs were said to have a 'special smart "sackiness"' at a time when most fashions were closely tailored to fit the body, following the lines of a controlling corset. This new fashionable looseness may well have seemed very daring, especially as this Edwardian notion of 'smartness' also had definite sexual and sensational overtones, producing a garment with just the right amount of exotic naughtiness. Loose, unstructured oriental garments more famously came to the fore in Paul Poiret's Sack dress of 1911, and the more tubular dress styles of the 1920s continued this feeling of modernity through emancipation of the body. This even extended to the head in 1920, when a Chinese hairstyle became fashionable.

The Chinese hairstyle was perceived as a threat to the very livelihoods of hairdressers and hairpiece weavers, because it was flat and unadorned, the hair being pulled straight back from the face and then fixed simply in a low *chignon* using an ornate comb.¹⁸ It was worn hatless and combined with pendant earrings, perhaps providing a useful transition between the high, full and elaborate styles of the pre-war era, and the simple bobs and close-fitting cloche hats of the mid 1920s. Using the terminology of warfare, hairdresser Emile Long described how 'this accursed Chinese mode ... was to be the



Fig 6.2. Suggested use for 'Chinese Chippendale' pattern wallpaper, including an array of lacquered furniture. The Wallpaper Manufacturers Ltd, c.1920. Rare Books & Special Collections, Jubilee Library, Brighton

ruin of the profession in general and of hairdressers in particular.¹⁹ However, sensing that resistance would be futile, he advised all hairdressers to 'know the enemy' instead, and to offer the 'Chinese' style as a way to sell false hair and expensive carved combs. Such diatribes against the 'Chinese coiffure' paralleled 18th century anxieties over the infiltration of chinoiserie styles into Britain, but Long was also mobilising the more contemporary rhetoric of the Yellow Peril, a xenophobic European, North American and Australian response to fears over Chinese immigration.

Chinoiserie, Modernity and Modernism

Whilst the *japonaiserie* of the late 19th century called for subtle combinations of green and turquoise, dramatic colour combinations were an important factor in the vibrant modernity of 1920s chinoiserie. Late 1890s and early 1900s advice had been for plain walls – a reaction against the dark and florid Victorian interior – but by 1913, large Chinese patterns were being recommended, using rich colours on a black background for a modern impact. Black and scarlet were said 'naturally' to suggest a 'Chinese' room, clearly inspired by the colours of lacquer furniture, and a wallpaper became available which used the late 18th century chinoiserie willow pattern printed in black, scarlet and gold.²⁰ Red lacquer furniture was much preferred above blue lacquer or dark woods, although occasional tables in cream, yellow, and green lacquer were used as well, providing colourful and contrasting elements within these vivid schemes.²¹

A 1920s Chinese interior was also meant to be as glossy as possible. Architect Basil Ionides's design for a red hall or staircase recommended heavily-varnished panels of willow pattern wallpaper in black, gold and scarlet with black surrounds, with all woodwork also painted black and heavily varnished.²² The floor was to be coloured scarlet, varnished and then waxed, and black lacquer-framed mirrors were to be used instead of pictures. Teamed with scarlet and gold curtains, scarlet upholstery with gold edges, cushions with large tassels and scarlet lacquer ornaments, this plan leaned heavily on Chinese influences to produce a very intense visual experience. Thus, a modern Chinese room was the very antithesis of dullness, and the gleaming copper floor and cut-glass lustres of Fleur's fictional drawing room begin to make sense.

Yet, Fleur's drawing room also contained a strange mixture of the overtly old and the avant garde – lacquer chests and copper flooring – referring to the earlier vogue for chinoiserie in Britain. Amidst a general revival of 18th century styles, the 'Chinese' designs of furniture makers such as Chippendale became fashionable because they seemed lighter and more refined than Victorian designs, making them seem modern even though they were reproductions (fig 6.2). Copies of older chinoiseries also presented an opportunity to exploit a nostalgia for the 18th century as an antidote to the bustling, brash Machine Age of cars, cinemas and department stores. A feeling of conservative modernity was created that upheld rather than



Fig 6. 4. Cabinet on stand by Ernest Gimson, c.1902. Victoria & Albert Museum

challenged the status quo for an upper class that had experienced a sharp decline in socio-economic power. Ionides designed a bathroom with Chinese wallpaper and a tasselled light fitting for Lady Diana Duff Cooper, and various other Chinese interiors.²³ Meanwhile, Queen Mary created her celebrated Chinese Chippendale room at Buckingham Palace, in which an old piece of chinoiserie silk provided the pattern for new wallpaper panels, curtains and upholstery (fig 6.3, cat F46).²⁴

Such uses for chinoiserie were reassuring because they gave the comforting but misleading impression of unchanging societies in Britain and in China. In fact, following the mid 19th century wars that were fought over the right of the Western powers to trade in China, China's standing in the West had slipped from a seemingly invincible trading power to a society in decline with a vanquished, semi-colonial status. More armed conflict during the suppression of the Boxer Uprising in 1900 had further decreased its standing, and contributed to the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and to the establishment of a new Republic. Thus, even as the mysterious world of emperors and mandarins was receding before the tide of westernisation, 20th century British chinoiserie maintained an illusion of those bygone pre-colonial relationships with China, and a more romantic, less troubling world.²⁵

Conservative approaches to Chinese design also existed within the realms of British modernism. Designer Maurice S R Adams (d. 1941) advised readers to avoid both period reproductions and 'novelty' designs from the continent which he considered unbearably exotic, to the point of 'impudence'.²⁶ It was also his stated opinion that in the modern appropriation of Chinese lacquer, Chinese forms and motifs should not be used. Nevertheless, Adams's own work was inspired by the 'Chinese', combining modern versions of 18th century furniture and ceilings with black floors and mirrors, Chinese carpets, and black silk furniture upholstery decorated with gold Chinese dragons.²⁷ Adams's interiors were said to combine 'culture, mild luxury and good taste', treading a path between the traditional and the avant garde, and above all establishing that chinoiserie, far from being exotic, was somehow 'naturally' and tastefully British.²⁸

Following the avant garde work of Eileen Gray and Jean Dunand in France, Adams, like many other designers of the period, was also creating modern furniture in art deco shapes, finished in a shiny coating of black lacquer (fig 6.4, cat C27). Even here, Chinese design could maintain its connections with femininity. In the mid 1920s, Betty Joel worked with female artist Cecil Leslie to produce modern lacquered furniture that was featured in an 'Ideal Boudoir' for the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition as 'by a woman for a woman's use'.²⁹ However, reproductions of 18th century shapes still prevailed, with firms such as Hille producing lacquered furniture painted with Chinese figures and landscapes, whilst chinoiserie lacquered beds were sold by Heals alongside their more Modernist designs.³⁰



Fig 6.5 Lampshade at Quex Museum, House and Gardens

Old chinoiseries also experienced a renaissance in the 'Chinese' electric lamp, created by using Chinese ceramic forms for the bases, and sometimes fanciful 'Chinese' shades as well. *The Book of the Home* tells us 'Lampshades of Chinese inspiration enjoy a perennial popularity, the more elaborate following the lines of the pagoda and Chinese temple, tassels and ornaments in the form of bells, and chains of beads festooned from angle to angle, forming the great feature to their decoration.' (fig 6.5)³¹ Lighting effects were said to be particularly good when the base was made from Chinese porcelain or European chinoiserie ceramics such as vases, ginger jars and figurines, the latter being topped with a shade in a 'fantastic form such as a parasol or palanquin'.³²

In vogue during the 1920s, the 'fantastic' nature of chinoiserie not only served as a location for European excess and social transgression during the 20th century, but also provided a reassuring set of continuities referring back to the 18th century. Chinese design in the houses of the rich was a nostalgic reminder of those former times when relationships with China were uncomplicated by warfare and immigration, and China appeared untouched by western influences. Conversely, the challenging nature of Chineseness, with its associations of threatening (and fascinating) exotic behaviour could be used to express some unsettling aspects of modernity because of a longstanding association with errant femininities, as well as providing colour combinations, fashionable shapes and motifs, and materials such as lacquer that were highly influential within avant garde design. Thus, chinoiserie was a fantasy of China that continued to serve the needs of western society.

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- 1 Suren Lalvani, 'Consuming the Exotic Other,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12 (1995) pp 263-86; Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) pp 136-141
- 2 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993) p.106
- 3 John Galsworthy, *The White Monkey* (1924), rpt. in *A Modern Comedy* (London: Penguin, 1980) pp 24-5
- 4 *Liberty Yule-tide Gifts* (London, Liberty, 1922) p.35; *Liberty Yule-tide Gifts 1923-1924* (London: Liberty, 1923) p.32
- 5 Galsworthy, *The White Monkey*, p. 41. Sarah Cheang, 'Women, Pets and Imperialism: The British Pekingese Dog and Nostalgia for Old China,' *Journal of British Studies* 45.2 (2006) pp 359-87
- 6 John Galsworthy, *The Silver Spoon* (1926) rpt. in *A Modern Comedy* (London: Penguin, 1980) pp. 293-299
- 7 Dudley Barker, *The Man of Principle: A View of John Galsworthy* (London: Heinemann, 1963) pp 205-206; James Gordin, *John Galsworthy's Life and Art: An Alien's Fortress* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987) p.501
- 8 Lady Kitty Vincent, *Good Manners* (London: Hodder, [1924]) p.63
- 9 David Stenn, 'Clara Bow: The "It" Girl's Notorious Home in Beverley Hills,' *Architectural Digest* (Apr. 1994) pp. 128-9, pp 268-9

- 10 Kay Anderson, 'Engendering Race Research: Unsettling the Self-Other Dichotomy,' in Nancy Duncan, ed., *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1996) pp 197-211; Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (London: Lawrence, 1992)
- 11 Sax Rohmer, *The Yellow Claw*, 1915 (London: Severn, 1975); Sax Rohmer, *Dope: A Story of Chinatown and the Drug Traffic*, 1919 (London: Cassell, 1929); Kohn pp 67-119. Mara L. Keire's study of the gendering of drug addiction finds that in America, cocaine addiction was seen as a feminine trait associated with prostitutes, effeminate men and the Chinatowns. Mara L. Keire, 'Dope Fiends and Degenerates: The Gendering of Addiction in the Early Twentieth Century,' *Journal of Social History*, Summer (1998) pp 809-822
- 12 Rohmer, *Dope* pp 86, 113
- 13 Davide C Minter, ed. *The Book of the Home: A Practical Guide for the Modern Household*, Vol. 1 (London: Gresham, 1927) pp 44-5
- 14 Mrs M Vince, *Decoration and Care of the Home: Some Practical Advice* (London: Collins, 1923) p.146
- 15 Edward W Gregory, *The Art and Craft of Home-Making: With an Appendix of 200 Household Recipes* (London: Murby, 1913) p.29; Basil Ionides, *Colour and Interior Decoration* (London: Country Life, 1926) p.73; Peter McNeil, 'Designing Women: Gender, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c.1890-1940,' *Art History* 17.4 (1995) pp 645-650
- 16 Nancy J Troy, *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003) pp 44-7, 49-54, 66-7
- 17 See for example evening gown, Chimère, designed by Paquin with a dragon and clouds in a Chinese style (Victoria & Albert Museum T.50-1948), 1920s pyjamas with Chinese dragons (Brighton Museum C002882), and an evening coat owned by Anne Armstrong Jones, the daughter of Maud Messel, designed by Reville with dragon motifs c. 1923 (Brighton Museum C004021).
- 18 Steven Zdatny, ed. *Hairstyles and Fashion: A Hairdresser's History of Paris, 1910-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p.194
- 19 Emile Long quoted in Zdatny, *ibid* p.183-5
- 20 Ionides, *op.cit.* p.63
- 21 Ionides, *op.cit.* pp 40, 61; Minter p.43; R. Randal Phillips and Ellen Woolrich, *Furnishing the Home* (London: *Country Life*, 1921) p.132
- 22 Ionides, *op.cit.* p.59
- 23 Ionides, *op.cit.* p.22 facing, p.23 facing and p.68 facing
- 24 H Clifford Smith, *Buckingham Palace: Its Furniture Decoration and History* (London: *Country Life*, 1931) pp 71-9
- 25 Whilst only small portions of China were British colonies, such as the island of Hong Kong, China was a colonial interest within the British empire. Sino-British relationships in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were formed in relation to a backdrop of imperialism, and China, its cultures and its peoples were subjected to Western colonial attitudes and interventions.
- 26 Maurice S R Adams, *Modern Decorative Art: A Series of Two Hundred Examples of Interior Decoration, Furniture, Lighting Fittings and Other Ornamental Features* (London: Batsford, 1930) pp 6-7
- 27 *Ibid* pp 59-62
- 28 *Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition: Olympia: March 2nd-25th 1925* (London: Ideal Home Exhibition, 1925) pp 219, 220; Adams p.59
- 29 *Ibid* p.220
- 30 Susanna Goodden, *At the Sign of the Fourposter: A History of Heal's* (London: Heal and Son, 1984) p.43; Sutherland Lyall, *Hille: 75 Years of British Furniture* (London: Elron, 1981) pp 9, 73, 71
- 31 Minter, *op. cit.* p.80
- 32 *Ibid* pp 80-81