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Chapter 3

Being Chiang Yee: Feeling, Difference and Story-telling

Sarah Cheang

> I am certainly not attempting to please learned scholars! I remember once talking with a lady who told me she would never write a book on 'oddments' for the sake of amusement, for no scholar would do that kind of thing![1]

Following Chiang Yee's example of perhaps not pleasing learned scholars, this chapter presents a liberal selection of humorous 'oddments' from *The Silent Traveller in London* and *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* which I hope the reader will relish and enjoy. I write, however, with a serious intent: that of creating space to think about what Chiang Yee can tell us about the experiences of Chinese men in Britain and America, the embodied and emotional side of life, and the composite nature of all histories. In the same way as Chiang Yee proposed the 'oddment' – the slice of life – as a way to counter particular cultural hierarchies of knowledge, this chapter explores what it is to be perceived as a cultural 'oddment', and how this might relate to Chiang Yee's lived experiences of being Chinese in Oxford.

Reading Chiang Yee is an unforgettable experience. My first encounter was with *The Silent Traveller in London*, and one passage stayed with me more than any other. This was the comical assertion that Chinese men are always much shorter than English policemen, with consequences for both Chinese masculine confidence and sartorial dignity:

> As I am taller than most Chinese here, my fellow-countrymen always nickname me "policeman" whenever I go among them. Inspired by this, I used to approach the admirable London "Bobby" for comparison. But I always withdrew again hastily as soon as I came up close – he would be towering above me. On many occasions I go out with Mr. S. I. Hsiung, the playwright, who is rather short, and he always warns me to beware of his hat falling off when he looks up to ask the policeman something![2]

I remember reading this passage and being utterly struck by this highly embodied description of encounters between Chinese and English masculinities. Being a woman of

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[1] Chiang Yee, *The Silent Traveller in London* (London: Country Life, 1945), xii-xiii.

[2] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in London*, 208.

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mixed Chinese/English heritage, I am fairly short myself, and so I could very easily relate to the idea of Hsiung, with his head thrown back, gazing up at an unbending policeman. In 1930s London, when hats were an ordinary and expected item of fashion, hats and hatlessness would have been an area of social anxiety when in public. Within Chiang Yee's humourous anecdote is the embarrassment of a wardrobe malfunction, turned into a body malfunction, turned into a 'racial' malfunction. He describes the friendly English 'Bobby' as an intimidating figure, who he wanted to approach, but could not. This vignette of Chiang Yee's made such a vivid, or felt, impression on me that, in my memory of the passage, I thought that there had been an accompanying illustration. Going back to the book some years later, I was astonished to find no little line drawing of Hsiung looking up, his hat rolling away, or Chiang Yee curiously sidling up to the policeman at a safe distance. Instead, I found an image of a very different scene: a befuddled 'Bobby' surrounded by dancing locals on Jubilee night.[3]

All authors are capable of making mistakes, and can choose to either capitalise or guard against the tricks that memory plays, and the ways that life experiences often colour our appreciation of the 'facts'. I cannot think about Chiang Yee without experiencing resonances with my own family history, and the times when I and other family members have found ourselves being or embodying China in Britain. I especially think about my father and my grandfather, who were also Chinese travellers in twentieth-century Britain.[4] Emotions, whether difficult or joyous, do not fit smoothly into linear narratives, whether these take the form of stories, official histories or academic essays. Embracing the irrational and the embodied, rather than struggling or shying away from it, can be an experimental strategy.[5] Can we arrive at a deeper understanding of Chiang Yee's work and experiences by focussing on how he connected with others, in the living sensing moment, across time and across

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[3] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in London*, Plate Xia, facing 203.

[4] My grandfather Chang Koon Cheang studied history at Cambridge University between 1929 and 1931 although he did not graduate and instead returned to Shanghai to marry. In 1958, my father Min Yin Cheang was also sent to the UK to study, but then chose to settle permanently on the south coast of England.

[5] Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, 'Decolonial Aesthesis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings', *Social Text Online*, 15 July (2013), 2–13. http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/

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cultures, simply through his physical presence? What can we learn from thinking about how he may have experienced his own physical presence? What was it to be a 'Silent Traveller', and how can we get at everything in that 'silence' that wasn't being said?

Understanding Misunderstandings

Historian Saul Friedländer argues that there is a continuum between personal and public memory. He writes of a 'twilight zone between history and memory' and dares us to enter it.[6] In Friedländer's work on his own personal positioning in relation to histories of the Holocaust, he confronts two scholarly taboos. The first is giving the historian a personal voice and position in allowing that a historian might have a personal relationship to the subject that they study, and an emotional vested interest. The second is engaging with the potentially unreliable memories of eye-witness survivors of traumatic events. Friedländer encourages us to deepen rather than deny the historian's role as a story teller, and to engage more with the way in which historical events were understood by eyewitnesses as they unfolded. I find this really useful when trying to make sense of what I find in the Silent Traveller books.

The persona of Silent Traveller created by Chiang Yee steered clear of controversial remarks, although we know that he had strong feelings about Chinese politics and about how Chinese people were regarded in Britain and America. How should we address the areas of difference and overlap between the lived experiences of Chiang Yee the author and the narrative accounts of life in England created through the character of the Silent Traveller? In

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[6] Saul Friedländer, 'Trauma, Transference and "Working through" in Writing the History of the "Shoah"', *History and Memory*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring – Summer, 1992), 39–59; James E. Young, 'Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voices of Historian and Survivor', *History and Memory*, vol. 9, no. 1/2; Gulie Ne'eman, ed., Passing into History: Nazism and the Holocaust beyond Memory – In Honor of Saul Friedlander on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 47–58.

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what ways are areas of slippage useful and important, both for readers and historians and for Chiang Yee himself. We can picture the Silent Traveller walking slowly and meditatively, focussing on simple things while experiencing nostalgic recollections, making Chinese aesthetic, social, or historical associations, or merely recording personal experiences and responses to everyday situations. But Chiang Yee himself was not always a silent traveller, and while being a Chinese eye and a Chinese brain at large in England, Chiang Yee also has much to say about being a Chinese body.

In fact, *Silent Traveller in Oxford* contains a number of statements on the problem of thinking in terms of 'race', and many wry references to how being perceived as physically Chinese affected Chiang Yee. The use of humour, and the charming, mild-mannered politeness of Chiang Yee's writing and drawing, should not discount the more disquieting aspects of these lived experiences, seen in lines such as these: 'I remembered having heard that Trinity is now the only college which does not admit Orientals. My flat face could not be disguised, so I passed on without entering to avoid misunderstandings'.[7]

What does the word 'misunderstandings' contain here? Though he moved in highly privileged and intellectual circles, there were places that Chiang understood only too well were off limits to him because of 'race' and racism. There were situations where being Chinese meant being the uncomfortable target of curious eyes, causing an internal emotional response. 'Misunderstandings', what are these? A mismatch between Chiang Yee's internal sense of self and the way he felt others perceived him as a representative of the Chinese 'race' while travelling and resident in England? I use the term 'race' here to denote a Western school of thought, honed and given credence through the rise of anthropology in the nineteenth century, that grouped people according to a specific set of physical characteristics (primarily skin and eye colour, hair type and facial features). Western concepts of 'race' were used to rank human beings in a hierarchy that placed white people of North-European descent at the top.[8] This was done in part by directly linking biological characteristics with cultural practices and histories, and then proposing that racial groups were differentiated by innate

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[7] Chiang Yee, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford,* 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1946), 17.

[8] Michael Banton, *Racial Theories*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

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differences in abilities and temperament. This 'science' of 'race' was developed in thoroughly racist social contexts, and although it is now completely rejected within anthropology, this was the main way that racial difference was understood in the time of the Silent Traveller, and it still underpins racist attitudes today.

In his stories and illustrations, Chiang Yee displays great *tact*. This is a word I have chosen for its meanings of skill and sensitivity. It has its roots in matters of touch, but it also reminds me of the word 'tacit' and implications of a knowing silence and matters that are implied but not stated. This chapter is for any reader who has ever wondered what it was like for Chiang Yee to *be* the Silent Traveller. But, I write especially for anyone who has ever recognised, in Chiang Yee's works, a shared experience of what it is like to be Chinese in England. As novelist and activist Elif Shafak succinctly puts it: 'Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart'.[9]

Being the 'Honourable' Chiang Yee

Chiang Yee's Oxford was that of the Second World War and the Second Sino-Japanese War. His London flat had been destroyed by bombing, and news from back home in China was filled with the horror, violence and tragedy of both civil war and the Japanese occupation. In *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, in a chapter called 'Honourable Pussy Cat', Chiang Yee tells of an incident on a bus that happened during this time:

> One summer evening while it was still light I was travelling on the top of a 'bus to Carfax. In front of me were four schoolgirls talking noisily, one of whom, a child of eleven or twelve, kept turning round to look at me. Then she would say something to her companions who would look round too. I could not hear what they were saying, but no doubt they were interested in my face being flat and strange. When we reached Carfax the girls alighted in front of me. No sooner had I stepped off than one of them shouted "Charlie Chan!" and the others followed suit. I presumed they recognized me as a fellow-countryman of Charlie Chan, so I smiled my thanks, and most of the passengers smiled too.
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> A few weeks later I was walking along Abingdon Road to visit a friend. Before reaching Lake Street I met a group of girls and boys coming from the

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[9] Elif Shafak, *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* (London: Wellcome Collection, 2020), 9.

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> swimming-pool. Suddenly one of them exclaimed “Charlie Chan!” and then “Look! Charlie Chan in Oxford!” I wanted to stop and ask them what they meant, but they had gone. When I reached my friend’s house I told him that I was now known as “Charlie Chan”. He smiled, and after scrutinizing me in silence said, “You do look like Charlie Chan, you know,” and we both laughed.[10]

In his story, it is soon clear why the Silent Traveller was suddenly receiving this particular attention. The American film *Charlie Chan in Panama* (1940) was playing in Oxford, its leading character the eponymous fictional Chinese-American police detective from Honolulu. Chiang Yee tells that he therefore went to the cinema to make his own comparison. In his accompanying illustration (figure 1), he created a visual rendering of the fictional Chan and the fictionalised Chiang Yee side by side. Details of dress show Chan wearing an American suit and tie, while Chiang Yee places himself in a more traditional Chinese collar and side-fastening garment, suggestive of a long scholar’s robe (*changpao*).[11] It is highly unlikely he would actually have worn such a robe on the streets of Oxford. Indeed, while Chiang Yee made use of artistic license to place himself in a more Chinese social envelope, his written reflections seem truer to life, and are focussed on the body itself. He reached the following conclusion:

> He [Charlie Chan] proved to have a face as flat as mine, but his broad cheeks and forehead made his face square, while mine is more rectangular. I could imagine however, that in profile, had I his moustache, we should look pretty much alike, and I was not surprised at the children’s mistake.[12]

Insert Figure 1 here

The American Charlie Chan films made between 1929 and 1949 are examples of what is termed ‘yellowface’, the practice of white actors and performers playing Chinese and Japanese roles. In films, from Richard Barthelmess playing Cheng in *Broken Blossoms*, and

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[10] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 78

[11] In nineteenth-century China, the *changpao* was associated with men of the non-labouring classes. In early Republican China, it offered an alternative fashion to the Western suit which could be seen as being linked to Western imperialism. Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (London: Hurst, 2007), 177–78.

[12] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 79

Boris Karloff as Fu Manchu, to Flora Robson as empress Cixi, white actors in yellowface have simulated Chinese body language and voices, and makeup artists have been praised for their abilities to create Chinese bodies.[13] Chiang Yee's comparison, in life and in the line drawing above, was between his own face, and that of European-American actor Sidney Toler who played Charlie Chan in twenty-two films.[14] Beyond costume and makeup, yellowface performances typically included a soft and low manner of speaking with halting intonation, walking with a shuffling gait and a stoop (in some instances almost bent double), holding the hands behind the back, or together in front within the sleeves. Dialogue frequently makes use of the idea of mysterious and ancient Chinese proverbs that could be real or invented.

The character of Charlie Chan – wise, kind and heroic, and commanding respect – was intended as a positive portrayal of Chinese men, in contrast to fictional villains such as Fu Manchu, and seems to have been well-received by audiences in China.[15] Chinese Americans, however, have testified to the damaging effects of yellowface and the general stereotyping of Chinese characters in popular films of the twentieth century.[16] For example, Bill Chu recalls that when he was growing up in Los Angeles and Philadelphia in the 1950s, he and his younger brother were subjected to racial taunts inspired by the fictional Confucian quotations features in the Charlie Chan films.[17] In 2003, Fox Movie Channel was forced to reconsider its Charlie Chan season after protests from activist organisations. Richard Konda, director of Asian-American civil rights organisation the Asian Law Alliance, stated: 'The movies were racist in the 1930s and they are still racist in 2003.'[18] In 1940s Oxford, Charlie Chan was widely understood and appreciated by audiences as a positive portrayal of Chinese-American masculinities (both the traditional Chan and his Americanised son). And yet, misunderstandings, and the sense of being misunderstood, would still occur.

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[13] *Broken Blossoms* (US 1919) dir. D. W. Griffith; *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (US 1932) MGM; *55 Days in Peking* (US/Spain 1963) dir. Samuel Bronston. For an account of how to 'turn occidentals into orientals, see Cecil Holland, 'Orientals Made to Order,' *American Cinematographer* (December 1932): 16, 48.

[14] In the Twentieth Century Fox/Monogram film series, the actors who have played Chan are Warner Oland, Manuel Arbó, Sidney Toler, Roland Winters, Ross Martin and Peter Ustinov. The character of Chan was not played by an actor of Chinese heritage until Chinese-American veteran actor Keye Luke (陸錫麒) was cast as the voice of Chan for the 1972 animated television series *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan*. Keye Luke had also appeared regularly on screen in the role of Chan's son in nine films between 1935 and 1949.

[15] Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) 247–58. The fictional character of Charlie Chan, calm and tolerant of racism, has been seen as exemplifying the notion of Chinese Americans as a model ethnic minority, as an explanation for his popularity alongside and perhaps still within discourses of the Yellow Peril. William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850–1940* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982) 181–82.

[16] Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 1–5.

Embracing an 'and/and' methodology is useful here. It enables us to engage with the shifts of emotional energy that are involved in constructing and maintaining a sense of self in the world, especially when under duress, and allows for the existence of conflicting emotions, memories and meanings.[19] Whether or not the figure of Charlie Chan provided a positive role-model, the spectacle of his Chineseness played into and constructed stereotypes that provided a language and available sign system for the singling out of Chinese people in Europe and America. It is important to ask the question, what was it *like* for Chiang Yee to sit in that cinema in Oxford watching Charlie Chan? He writes:

> I was deep in thought and not really attending to the film when the audience burst into laughter. I looked at the screen. Charlie Chan's son had followed his father after dark to search a large house and was disturbed by something jumping from a height. He told his father it was a pussy cat, but Charlie Chan corrected him, saying '*Honourable* Pussy Cat'. The audience was apparently laughing at the idea of addressing a cat as "honourable", and I laughed too.[20]

Chiang Yee twins this anecdote with other uses of the word 'honourable' within an English context, by quickly moving on to how he was hearing the word used frequently as a form of address during formal debates in Oxford. A stereotype of fictional Chinese speech is

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[17] Pradnya Joshi, 'A Charlie Chan Film Stirs an Old Controversy', *The New York Times* 7 March 2010. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/08/business/media/08chan.html. Accessed 22 November 2020.

[18] 'Charlie Chan season shelved after race row', *The Guardian* 3 July 2003. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/jul/03/news. Accessed June 2019.

[19] Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla, 'Decolonizing the Curriculum: Transformation, Emotion and Positionality in Teaching', *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 6 (2020), 879–900.

[20] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 79.

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shifted, and he presents us with a new, re-digested stereotype. It is the Charlie Chan idiom, re-framed. In Chiang Yee's telling, while audiences laughed at Charlie Chan's quaint use of language, a silent traveller-turned-cinema-goer, a watcher in the dark, was laughing at the idea of Chan encouraging his son to address a cat 'honourable' as if the cat were a speaker at an Oxford debate or a member of parliament.

But, let us revisit this moment one more time by comparing the story Chiang Yee tells to the images and sounds fixed into the celluloid itself. In the film, the scene in question actually unfolds like this: Charlie Chan and his son are searching a dark house. Chan's son, who, in an earlier scene, had had a frightening encounter in the dark with a monkey, sees something moving and warns his father to watch out for a monkey. Instead, however, a cat runs past. The son exclaims: 'That was no monkey!' His father supports this with the affirming observation: 'Honourable Pussy Cat'.

We could speculate that Chiang Yee, who perhaps was not following the film closely and had drifted off into reverie, watched this scene and misinterpreted what he saw as a Chinese father correcting his modern Americanised son. And, we could also speculate that Chiang Yee re-authored the memory to fit the theme that he wanted to develop for the Silent Traveller as he wrote his book about Oxford. Indeed, the notion of titling a cat 'honourable' is central to the crafting of the entire chapter, which focussed next on a story of seeing the Chinese ambassador Wellington Koo (1888–1985) participating in a Union debate. Speaker after speaker warmly praised the ambassador and all the people of China for their continued resistance to Japanese invasion.

Chiang Yee, again a silent member of an Oxford audience, writes of this moment: 'Becoming suddenly self-conscious about my racial identity with the people being so praised, I shifted in my seat, as if in acknowledgement. My feelings however were far from being unmixed gratification'. He explains that he was wondering whether China deserved this praise. How well was China doing? And what were the weaknesses as well as the strengths of modern China? He continues: 'I cannot help recalling that in China's unregenerate days, during the beginning of the Revolution, when praise of her was rare, there did in fact exist among her people many time-honoured virtues that are now all too often conspicuous by their

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absence’.[21] He reflects on China as a very young nation that could have serious and dangerous faults, and observes that parents need to guide their children. Interwoven in this discourse of the old guiding the young, are reflections on the tragedy of all the lives being lost in China. Themes of parental wisdom, the folly of youth, and the disjuncture between traditional and modern China, swirl in a tempestuous inner dialogue, mixing with the awful traumas of war and separation from homeland, and surfacing ultimately in a story of finding oneself painfully conflicted on suddenly having to be *consciously* Chinese.

The story continues:

> Then followed a number of speakers. What struck me most was the frequent repetition of such phrases as “Honourable gentlemen of this side and of that side”, and “Honourable members of this house”. I was astonished at the exaggerated gesture of the speakers in saying these words. The mention of the word “honourable” reminded me so vividly of “Charlie Chan in Panama” and the Honourable Pussy Cat that I rather lost the thread of the debate.[22]

Ultimately, the trip to the cinema so coloured the Silent Traveller’s experience of the Union debate, with the presence of Wellington Koo appearing as Charlie Chan, and the new Chinese nation as his modern son, that he was not even listening in the end, just as, in the cinema, he had not always been watching. And so, the chapter finishes with these last remarks:

> I must not close this chapter without mentioning a stout speaker … He was most impressive when he said “My President, Sir” or “Honourable Gentlemen, sir” as though blowing out a candle. With his head bent forward over his notes he might have been Charlie Chan bowing to the Honourable Pussy Cat, for I could not see his face clearly from my gallery seat. I laughed to myself and murmured: “Here *is* Charlie Chan, Charlie Chan in Oxford.” After all, Charlie Chan was a westerner.
>
> I still smile when I think of that occasion.[23]

And so, Chiang Yee brings us back to the blending of historical record and personal experience, hard facts caught on celluloid and soft memories held in the mind and shaped by the heart. The truth of the Silent Traveller’s account is exactly in this murky land between autobiography, documentary, memory and storytelling. As Patricia Derocher reminds us:

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[21] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 82.

[22] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 83.

[23] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 84.

> experiences are always both “real” and “constructed,” at once referring to actual, outward, objective events, but always necessarily filtered through our subjective lens as embodied objects, and further shaped by language and available social narratives as we attempt to convey our experiences to others. While experiences refer outwardly to actual events in the world, experience itself is always a narratively crafted account of the event – interpreted within, processed within.[24]

Pain and discomfort, mistakes and confusion are what make *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* of real value when trying to understand what is meant for Chiang Yee to be Charlie Chan, a racialized body in Oxford and his hopes for a more harmonious cosmopolitan future. In the chapter ‘It is New to Me’, he muses on the way that Oxford University’s historic buildings and use of traditional robes are animated by the presence of modern humanity in a mixing of old and new. Included among the new was his ‘own flat face from modern China, blending harmoniously with the ancient buildings.’[25] Stories of how he managed that body from modern China during his years in Oxford also provides further evidence of how Chiang Yee used the ambiguity inherent in a misunderstanding to leave a more truthful record of mid-twentieth century Chinese experiences in England.

‘Hair raid’: encounters at the barber shop

Insert Figure 2: Hair Raid about here

My father always used to cut his own hair, laying sheets of newspaper carefully across the bathroom floor to catch the thick black tufts as they fell. He explained that English barbers did not know how to cut Chinese hair – one experience had been enough. Reading Chiang Yee, however, I wonder what else might have been in the mix, where bodily experiences connect and separate us, and public displays of the primary signifiers of race take on a frightening resonance.

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[24] Patricia Derocher, *Transnational Testimonios: The Politics of Collective Knowledge Production* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 30

[25] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 67–68.

In the chapter 'Hair Raid', Chiang Yee describes the Silent Traveller's own visit to the barbers in Oxford, and draws himself surrounded by the tufts of his own hair (figure 2). Perhaps significantly, he mentions that he only ever patronised one particular barber shop, inconveniently located two bus rides away.[26] Chief among its benefits was that it was a small shop, away from the city centre, run by a barber whose deafness reduced conversation to a minimum. One might say he was in search of privacy. Once in the barber's chair, however, not only the hair but also the haircut was in danger of being cut short:

> While I was having my hair cut, four children, towels and bathing costumes over their arms, dashed into the shop. Just then the siren sounded, and the children one after the other shouted out, 'Hair raid! Hair raid!' until the barber told them to be quiet. The siren sounded familiar to my ears after the London blitzes, and I wondered whether it was familiar to the youngsters, or whether they were joking at my thick black hair falling to the ground in such big quantities. After all, it *was* a hair raid, and I felt not at all uncomfortable at being laughed at.[27]

Hair colour and texture is one of the primary signifiers of 'race', along with skin and eye colour and facial features.[28] A highly visible part of the human body, easily covered or exposed, cut, dressed and treated, hair is very widely used by all human cultures to signal many different forms of social identity. Hair is also highly personal, a natural part of the body that grows continually and must be constantly managed in order to fit in or create an effect. It is not surprising, therefore, that hair is an important vehicle for social and personal meanings.[29]

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[26] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 98.

[27] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 102.

[28] Sarah Cheang, 'Roots: Hair and Race', in *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, eds., Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 27-42.

[29] Susan J. Vincent, *Hair: An Illustrated History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, 'Hair,' *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion*, Online update 2011.

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In 'Hair Raid', Chiang Yee appears very comfortable with being an unfamiliar body in England. He is at home with his difference. We could speculate that the children in his anecdote who ran into the shop either knew or were related to the barber, and often shouted out 'hair raid' at the sound of the siren to taunt the barber or merely for their own amusement. That the Silent Traveller was left wondering if it had been the conspicuousness of his black hair that had caused their actions – that *his* moment was experienced as being about his hair – points to a lack of access to what is often termed 'white privilege'. Whether or not he felt uncomfortable at the joke, the Silent Traveller could not discount the feeling of being an alien body. As if to underline this point, Chiang Yee writes that shortly before, on arrival at the barber's shop:

> A kindly-looking old lady was sitting near the door waiting for her husband. Smilingly she asked me whether I had come from Pennyfield. 'No,' I answered, 'I have come from London.' She seemed surprised at my answer, and I remembered then that Pennyfield was where the famous Limehouse, or Chinatown, is situated. The old woman apparently lived near there and knew or had seen many of my compatriots. She might even have a lot to tell me. She looked so unsatisfied with my reply that I hurriedly added that I had quite often been to Pennyfield.[30]

There are worlds of experiences in this short paragraph. The friendly intentions of the woman in talking to the Silent Traveller, connecting with him because he was physically recognisable as a 'Chinese', or, using his Chineseness as the connective tissue between two strangers. Her seeking out of fellow Londoners in Oxford and her assumption that any Chinese man in 1940s England must be part of the Chinese community of London's quasi-mythical East-End Chinatown.[31] The implication that having lived near/known/seen Chinese people in London was enough to create common ground with the Silent Traveller. The pressure that the Silent Traveller felt to satisfy these preconceptions. His apparent sensitivity and politeness that resulted in his actively seeking some way to support the misunderstanding, perhaps to mitigate against the kind of social embarrassment that dissuaded Chinese travellers from visiting Trinity College, as we have seen. Here, possession of an ‘Oriental’ body rendered the Silent Traveller a member of a diasporic community, rather than an excluded foreigner, however that body was still understood as out of place.

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[30] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 101–102.

[31] Anne Veronica Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

An Exile and a Refugee

Where do you look for role models, allegiances and belonging, when abroad? In the course of his book about Oxford, Chiang Yee brings his Silent Traveller into comparison, companionship and connection with Chinese friends and ambassadors, Charlie Chan, London East Enders, the Chinese nation (both new and old), and all people in possession of a ‘flat face’ and black hair. During the interwar period, many urban exploration genre writings included a visit to London’s ‘Chinatown’, which at that time centred on two short streets in the East End where small numbers of Asian seamen had taken up residence. These accounts of the Chinese in Britain by non-Chinese ‘travellers’ blend touristic voyeurism with a pseudo-anthropology of social, physical and racial types for an implied white middle class readership.[32] In comparison, Chiang Yee did not bring his readers to the East End, even in *The Silent Traveller in London*. In fact, the closest the Silent Traveller ventures to ‘Chinatown’ is in the abstract, in an encounter at the barber’s shop in Oxford, and via an awkward misunderstanding.

Chiang Yee mixed in cosmopolitan and elite circles.[33] However, he carried an extraordinary awareness of the need to explain himself and his presence, as a modern intrusion into British space, and sometimes even an anguished one. For all his urbane, intellectual and well-connected ramblings (both physical and lyrical), when reflecting on a visit to Queen’s College, he described himself/the Silent Traveller as ‘an exile and refugee in Oxford’, left behind in England while other Chinese friends and acquaintances had moved on.[34] A story within a story within a story, Chiang Yee relates how his friend Ke-chin had shown him a room said to be haunted by the ghost of a young man who had been murdered by a don. Later, dreaming he was back there, the Silent Traveller encounters the ghost himself. In an emotional one-way dialogue (the ghost remained silent), Chiang Yee writes the following:

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[32] See for example Stephen Graham, *London Nights: Studies and Sketches of London at Night* (London: John Lane, 1925); H. V. Morton, *H. V. Morton’s London* (London: Methuen, 1940).

[33] Examples of his many acquaintances include Reginald Johnston, Stewart Lockhart, Laurence Binyon and Kenneth Clark. Da Zheng, *Chiang Yee: The Silent Traveller from the East* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

[34] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 106.

> "I wonder," said I, "if you would care to come in for a rest and a chat? It must be depressing to have a lot to say and no one to listen to it. Please forgive me for referring in any way to your tragedy, but I am a Chinese who has come from a far country and would like to hear all you may have to say. If you would care to confide in me I might be able to give you the sympathy you need … Naturally you think yourself misunderstood by the general public. You have refused to discuss or argue the matter, because you were deprived of the right of doing so. The only thing they know is that they are frightened of you. *I* can understand your grief, and why you are so unhappy, but who else will trouble to sympathise with you? If you heard their remarks about your appearances here, intended as they are as a joke or to frighten someone, you would be most depressed to realize how you are misunderstood. But one is often misunderstood in life, and you must make the best of it. Confucius once said: "he who does not feel unhappy when he is misunderstood by others – is he not a gentleman?"[35]

I find this passage immensely moving. Through the figure of the Silent Traveller, trying his best to communicate and find companionship with a spirit conjured by a dreaming subconscious, Chiang Yee gives voice to his own sense of isolation, feelings of having a disruptive alien appearance, and the social rightness – the gentlemanly behaviour – of smoothing over and philosophising away any damaging effects to the psyche. A dignified silence reigns. And, rather than drawing on a fear of ghosts as harmful entities, common in Chinese traditions, Chiang Yee chooses at this point to humanise, not demonise, the ghost.

'Why should people be separated by terms of race or nation?' Chiang Yee asks at the end of *The Silent Traveller in London*.[36] It is a theme that he also uses to end *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, this time tinged with the messiness of lived experience. In an earlier chapter, in which he watches the ducks in University Park, he says with some force, 'If only I

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[35] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 107.

[36] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in London,* 263.

Chiang Yee and His Circle: Chinese Artistic and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1930-1950. Edited by Paul Bevan, Anne Witchard and Da Zheng. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022.
Pre-copy edit version.

could one day see the different names of races and nations disappear from the vocabulary of mankind! Let each one of us be just a member of the *human* race, as the ducks and water-hens are of the bird race, living happily together'.[37] At the end of his book, however, referencing the doubts about his Chinese appearance that had prevented the Silent Traveller from venturing into the grounds of Trinity College, he declares:

> If you intend to study in Oxford, you had better find out which college you would like to enter – if you can reach the required standard … I may as well warn you now that no matter how much you may admire Trinity, you will be wasting your time trying to enter it.

Then, in a list of points to bear in mind for Chinese visitors to Oxford, he brings us back the episode in the barbers, playful folding micro and meta-geographies, with one last joke on the final page: 'your flat face will always identify you as an "East Ender"'.[38]

Misunderstandings, uncomfortable or amusing, have been at the heart of this chapter, inspired by the Silent Traveller's combination of humour and diplomacy in confronting the everyday of cultural division. Chiang Yee captures so much of the historical moment as lived experience, precisely because he retains the multi-layered complexity of subjective reality, rather than pursuing a more conventional narrative, purged of 'oddments'. In wartime Britain, confronted with the horrors of the present, reassurance could always be found in the stability of ancient buildings and traditions that Chiang Yee presented as appealing to both Chinese and British sensibilities. His work can be seen as bridge-building between nations in pursuit of global racial harmony, in which cultural difference is constantly morphing into cultural similarity. Experiences of difference, however, embodied and deeply felt, and the effects of trauma and unhappiness on the laying down of narrative accounts, are also here to be listened to, even if, like ghosts, they are the stories within the stories.

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[37] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 95.

[38] Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Oxford*, 183.