Chiang Yee and the Hsiungs: Solidarity, Conviviality and the Economy of Racial Representation

This chapter examines Chiang Yee's relationship with the Hsiungs, arguably the most famous Chinese literary couple living in Britain during the 1930s. Their relationship, though one of evident mutuality, solidarity and conviviality as diasporic Chinese writers in Britain, was also shaped by the economy of racial representation at the time. Arguably, despite his highly popular *Silent Traveller* series Chiang Yee did not achieve the level of visibility enjoyed by the Hsiungs. Shih-I and Dymia Hsiung were a couple who arrived in Britain from China in the 1930s and who, in an extraordinary twist of fate, unexpectedly shot to worldwide fame, thanks to Shih-I Hsiung's play *Lady Precious Stream*. Hsiung became known as the first Chinese stage director ever to work in the West End and on Broadway. With her book *Flowering Exile*, Dymia Hsiung became the first Chinese woman in Britain to publish a full-length work of either fiction or autobiography in English. During the 1930s and 1940s, such was their fame that the Hsiungs were household names in a way Chiang was not. However, it is also probably the case that Chiang Yee's legacy survives in a way that the Hsiungs' has not. For while Chiang Yee is still known to general readers today, thanks in part to the number of his books that can be found in secondhand bookshops around the UK, what is extraordinary is that, until recently, the story of the Hsiungs had been almost completely forgotten, erased from history.[1]

In this chapter I will discuss the major role the Hsiungs played in both Chiang's career and personal life as a diasporic Chinese, exiled from his home country. In doing so, I seek to navigate an interdiscplinary path between approaches to the study of transnational migration and of immigrant and racialised minority cultural production in cultural studies, art historical and literary research. I examine Chiang's forging of ethnic ties in diaspora but also explore how for him, as a migrant who was also an artist, his ethnic ties were compromised by the way in which he and other diasporic Chinese writers at the time, including Hsiung, were inserted into the economy of British culture. The significance of ethnic ties for migrants is well recognised in social science literatures, so much so that in some, for example,

[1] Diana Yeh, *The Happy Hsiungs: Performing China and the Struggle for Modernity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014).

culturalist accounts, it has become a taken-for-granted narrative based on an assumed pre-existing community. Critical of such accounts, this chapter seeks to render visible the significant labour required to achieve community in diaspora and then addresses an issue that has attracted less attention – the way in which these ethnic ties may be fractured by economies of racial representation.

As Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer have written about contemporary Black cultural production, the structures of racism that have marginalised Black artists in Britain confer upon them a burden of representation, such that they are seen as 'representatives' who speak on behalf of, and are therefore accountable to their communities.[2] As Mercer continues:

> In such a political economy of racial representation where the part stands in for the whole, the visibility of a few token black public figures serves to legitimate, and reproduce, the invisbility, and lack of access to public discourse, of the community as a whole.[3]

Chiang's relationship with Hsiung was one of mutuality, solidarity and conviviality, and even shared calling – that of contesting dominant perceptions of the Chinese circulating in Europe and the USA. Yet, in an economy of racial representation, where only a few Chinese artists or writers were admitted to visibility, but were burdened with representing their 'culture' or nation, it was also one fraught with tension, almost from the very beginning.

I first discuss the significance of Shih-I Hsiung in helping to launch Chiang Yee's career as an artist and a writer, not only through commissioning him to produce drawings to accompany his own writings but also through introducing him and recommending him to significant cultural figures, both Chinese and British. I then go on to discuss the role of the Hsiungs' homes in London and Oxford in providing emotional sanctuary, 'a home away from home' through the convivial gatherings they held for Chiang and a range of other Chinese students, artist and intellectuals. I then examine the political mission shared by Shih-I Hsiung and Chiang who both sought to

[2] Paul Gilroy, 'Cruciality and the Frog's Perspective', *Third Text* 2 no. 5 (1988), 33–44. Mercer, K. (1994), *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), 240.

[3] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 240.

contest racialised representations of the Chinese circulating in Europe and the USA. In the final section, however, I highlight how these different forms of solidarity could be ruptured as a result of the political economy of racial representation the two writers found themselves in. In doing so, I bring to light not only a less known dimension of Chiang's life, but more broadly, illuminate how economies of racial representation can shape the everyday lives of artists who are also migrants, fracturing solidarities and rupturing even the most intimate of relations.

<A> Becoming Artists in Diaspora: Collaborations and Cultural Connections

According to Census figures, in 1931, there were fewer than 2,000 China-born people in England and Wales, with just over 1,000 in London, which included an elite group of intellectuals and students.[4] By the time Chiang Yee arrived in London in June 1933, Hsiung, a fellow native from Jiangxi Province, had already been living there for almost a year. Chiang moved in to share Hsiung's two-storey maisonette at 50 Upper Park Road in Hampstead. Fortuitously for Chiang, it was exactly at this time that Hsiung completed his adaption of the classical Peking Opera *Wang Baochuan* for the English stage, which he named *Lady Precious Stream*. Hsiung found a publisher for the play first, with Methuen and invited Chiang to illustrate it, alongside Xu Beihong (1895–1953), one of the first artists to reflect the spirit of new modern China in painting. Although trained as a chemist, Chiang had developed a passion for painting instilled in him as a child by his father, who had been an artist. When the play came out in July 1934, it boasted three colour plates by Xu and twelve monotone works by Chiang Yee.

Despite the mutual benefits of this first collaboration, however, it was to sow the early seeds of discontent between the two men and set a tone for their future relationship. For when Hsiung finally staged *Lady Precious Stream* in November 1934, the play was an overnight success, commended by theatre audiences and critics alike. It became *the* society show to see and ran for three years in the West End. Powerful figures including successive prime ministers attended, and it was critically acclaimed by literary figures such as J. B. Priestley (1894–1984) and H. G. Wells (1866–1946). Even Her Majesty Queen Mary went to see it, on her very first theatre

[4] Figures include non-ethnic Chinese from China, but exclude ethnic Chinese born elsewhere.

visit after her Silver Jubilee celebrations. The following year, *Lady Precious Stream* even went to New York, where Hsiung met none other than the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt when she attended a performance on Broadway. Hsiung, no doubt intoxicated by this new success, exclaimed to Chiang that he might well become the illustrator for his future works. Chiang found this patronising. It was then that he resolved that he would also become an author in his own right.[5]

Nonetheless, it is through Hsiung that Chiang was able to develop relationships with significant British social, cultural and literary figures, such as the Royal Academician, Philip Connard (1875–1958), with whom he took motorboat and rowing trips down the River Thames. After seeing a production of *Armlet of Jade* at the theatre, Chiang also met at the Hsiungs' the Earl and Countess of Longford, who later visited his exhibition of English lake drawings at the Calmann Gallery and even invited him to their house in Dublin to stay. Chiang also found himself positioned within international flows of celebrated artists, writers and performers from China and the USA, some of whom would become significant to his career. These included Xu Beihong, who had contributed the colour plates to *Lady Precious Stream.* After being introduced to him by Shih-I Hsiung, Chiang accompanied Xu to museums and galleries in London and even to see the African American star Paul Robeson (1898–1976), who was in London making a musical film, and had befriended Hsiung. Xu, together with Liu Haisu (1896–1994), the founder of the first school of fine arts in the new China, had been organising a series of major exhibitions of Chinese art in Europe. Liu arrived in London in late 1934 to mount the Modern Chinese Painting Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries, which opened the following year. Liu invited Chiang to participate in the exhibition. It was a significant moment for Chiang to exhibit alongside some of the greatest modern artists in China and, of the ten works he displayed, he even managed to sell one small painting.

However, it was Hsiung himself who was instrumental in Chiang Yee's first major publication, *The Chinese Eye*. Methuen, which had published *Lady Precious Stream,* was seeking a Chinese writer to author a book about Chinese art in the run-up to the International Exhibition of Chinese Art. Despite Chiang's concern that his knowledge of English would not be adequate to the task, on Hsiung's

[5] Da Zheng, *Chiang Yee: The Silent Traveller from the East* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

recommendation, he was appointed and engaged his student Innes Herdan to, as he put it in his acknowledgements, 'render into lucid English my clumsy expressions'.[6] Hsiung wrote the preface for the book and it came out on 21 November 1935, a week before the International Exhibition.

In his contribution, Hsiung articulates one of the major goals that he and Chiang shared, and which differentiated them from other Chinese intellectuals in Britain at the time, such as Xu Zhimo (1897–1931), Ling Shuhua (1904–1990) and other members of the Crescent Moon group who mixed with the Bloomsbury set – the desire to reach a general public and thereby educate them about China and the Chinese. He wrote:

> Books on Chinese Art already existing were all written by Western critics, whose conceptions, though valuable, would certainly give an interpretation quite different from that of Chinese artists. The author of this book treats the history and principles and philosophy of painting so deftly and yet so simply that one cannot help being instructed and entertained at the same time. It is not a big book, and thank Heavens, not an academic book! If Mr Chiang has achieved nothing else but has succeeded in writing about Chinese Art without being tiresomely academic, both the author and the reader ought to be highly congratulated.[7]

Referring to Chiang's pen-name, Hsiung further observes that 'silent water runs deep', writing 'Whenever he shuts himself up for a certain period during which you hear nothing from him, he is sure to produce a series of exquisite paintings or a volume of lovely poems'.[8] Yet, other passages are more ambiguous. Hsiung's preface begins by introducing Chiang, and explaining how he has more than one string to his bow – that he studied Chemistry but is more of statesman than a scientist for his work governing districts in the Yangtze valley. But, he continues, anyone who takes him for

[6] Chiang Yee, 'Acknowledgements', *The Chinese Eye: An Interpretation of Chinese Painting* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, [1935] 1970), vii–ix, x. Originally published by Metheun in 1935.

[7] Shih-I Hsiung [1935] (1970) 'Preface' in Chiang Yee, *The Chinese Eye*, vii–ix.

[8] Hsiung, 'Preface', viii.

a statesman might think they're mistaken when they hear that he is also lecturing in Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies. He continues:

> To those who saw his pictures at a *Men of the Trees* Exhibition last year and at the Modern Chinese Painting Exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in the Spring, and at other exhibitions on the Continent, he is definitely an artist. His more intimate friends who have read his recently-published poems on English scenery will no doubt have another name for him.[9]

This passage is characteristic of Hsiung's jocular writing style, in which he pokes fun at his subjects and readers, often through creating multiple meanings or suddenly derailing expectations. It could be argued that here in this game of 'mistaken identities', Hsiung is suggesting that 'the other name' for Chiang would be 'poet'. Yet, making use of the idiomatic way in which the expression 'will no doubt have another name for him' is used, Hsiung also hints at an alternative that would be disparaging. A letter from Hsiung around the same time shows how, while frequently recommending Chiang, Hsiung did so in a way that betrayed a sense of superiority and power, if not ownership over Chiang. From the lofty heights of the Hotel Edison, overlooking Times Square, during the Broadway run of *Lady Precious Stream*, Hsiung writes a letter, turning down an invitation, because he says 'they made a big ballyhoo here about the author directing his own play and I cannot very well give them the go-by'. But, he continues:

> I hope you will find the Chinese ambassador and Mr. Lawrence Binyon sufficient to be your main attractions, and if you like you can have Mr. Chiang Yee, the artist who has just published his book on Chinese art entitled *The Chinese Eye*, to say a few words for you. Although he is not a good speaker, and liable to be nervous on such a pompous occasion, his appearance is very attractive.[10]

[9] Hsiung, 'Preface', viii.

[10] Letter from Shih-I Hsiung to Christine, 16 November 1935, the Hsiung family archive, Washington DC, hereafter HFA.

With this emphasis on 'appearance', Hsiung acknowledges the way in which, during the 1930s in Britain, it was often only a limited visibility of the Chinese as a physical body and not representation of the self that is granted to the Chinese. This, Hsiung knew well himself, the embodied presence of himself and of Dymia a constant source of attention in the press. A review of the Malvern Theatre Festival in 1938, for example, describes how Hsiung's 'neat silk-clad figure' added an 'exquisite' Chineseness to the internationalist landscape, populated by 'a tall young negro', 'a young French girl, knowing no English but expert in the universal language of dancing', 'a shy New Zealander', 'a sprinkle of Americans' and 'two young Scots in swinging kilts'.[11] Here, the presence of foreign bodies are only significant in constructing the event's aura as 'a great cosmopolitan social festival: a theatrical League of Nations'.[12] The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has argued that nation-states manage difference 'by creating various kinds of international spectacle to domesticate difference, and by seducing small groups with the fantasy of self-display on some sort of global or cosmopolitan stage'[13].

In assessing Chiang's value in terms of his 'attractive appearance', Hsiung's letter highlights how he consigns his 'Brother Chiang' to this economy of racial representation where Chineseness is domesticated and only circulated as a visible sign of consumable, exoticised difference. This, however, is not necessarily indicative of a fantasy of self-display or of his relations with Chiang specifically. Rather, Hsiung himself knowingly participated in this economy out of perceived necessity. Though he had arrived in London, wearing a Western suit and clutching a realist play about the class-divide in modern China, his experiences in navigating the British cultural world had demonstrated that he could only gain access to visibility through crafting an aura of exoticised Chineseness.[14] By the end of his life in diaspora, he was rarely seen dressed in anything but the traditional Chinese robe that was so essential to this visibility.

Nonetheless, there remains a difference in the way Chiang wrote and spoke about Hsiung. Chiang also frequently recommended his friend for work too, for

[11] *Sussex Daily News*, 16 August 1938.

[12] *Sunday Times*, 29 July 1938.

[13] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*: *Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 39.

[14] Yeh, *Happy Hsiungs.*

example, proposing him for some film work on an 'Anglo-Chinese' story.[15] However, in Chiang's recommendations, and indeed, his wider writings on Hsiung, there is no such belittling characterisation. For example, writing about *Lady Precious Stream*, he says:

> I think anyone who has seen this play and compared it with *Chu Chin Chow* [an Orientalist musical] will not be in any doubt over their relative merits, but I should like to describe some of the difficulties Mr. Hsiung had to overcome before the play appeared. He certainly showed patience and determination. For a whole year he tried to find a manager to take it, and I think it was rejected eleven times, and among those who refused to take the risk were Sir Barry Jackson and Mr. Leon M. de Lion. It is interesting to note that after *Lady Precious Stream* had become a popular success, Mr. Lion himself played the part of the prime minister for some time, and Sir Barry Jackson took the play to Malvern Festival![16]

Chiang goes on to detail Hsiung's further troubles in dealing with the British cast:

> Mr Hsiung had to attend rehearsals faithfully for four weeks, every day from morning till evening. Not every playwright is troubled in this way, but in a play where the whole dramatic tradition was strange to the actors and actresses, there was no help for it. An actress might want to wear a man's embroidered robe, or an actor would insist on donning a lady's skirt. … None of them wanted to take it very seriously, and they often joked – "Are we really going to wear these clothes on stage?" Mr Hsiung's good humour over everything is much to be admired and his success well deserved.[17]

As these passages suggest, when writing about Hsiung, Chiang questions not his friend, for whom he has only praise, but rather the non-Chinese theatre directors and actors that Hsiung had to deal with. This was consistent with their shared mission of

[15] Letter from Chiang Yee to Mr Browne, 16 July 1942, HFA.

[16] Chiang Yee, *The Silent Traveller in London* (Signal Books: Oxford, [1938] 2002), 144. First published by Country Life.

[17] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London*, 144–45.

educating westerners about the Chinese, which I discuss further below. First, however, I discuss another significant aspect of the Hsiungs' role in Chiang Yee's life as a diasporic Chinese: their offer of a place like 'home'.

<B>Living in Diaspora: Conviviality and Social Connections

Following the success of *Lady Precious Stream* and *The Chinese Eye*, the two men were united in another, much larger, common cause. As Japan continued its incursions in China, they were bound together in the resistance campaign. Both were in a position to use their fame to contribute to the ongoing resistance campaign, and both were delegates to the first International Peace Campaign Congress in Brussels in 1936. Two years later, in 1938, the Japanese army entered Jiangxi, their home province. Chiang's home was devastated and his family fled to Chongqing. The realities of the Sino-Japanese war are largely obscured in *The Silent Traveller in London*, beyond a dedication mentioning 'the entrance of the invader into my native city'.[18] Soon after, in 1939, Chiang himself escaped the London Blitz by moving to the relative safety of Oxford, where he lived in Southmoor Road. The following year, Chiang and Hsiung worked together for the Joint Broadcasting Commission on a series of talks for audiences in Malaya on the topic of 'English Life and Thought.' In 1943, Hsiung and his family also moved to Oxford, in the hope that sending their children to a local school would improve their chances of getting into Oxford University.

In Oxford, the Hsiungs rented a house in Iffley Turn. Once the childhood home of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890), Grove House was subsequently owned by the historian of India, Sir George Forrest (1845–1926), and also enjoyed the presence of Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), a regular visitor during the writing of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). It would later be bought by Graham Greene (1904–1991). For the time being, however, it was the Hsiungs' new home – and to a certain extent, Chiang's, since, it became, according to Dymia Hsiung's autobiography *Flowering Exile*, 'the social centre of the Chinese community in England'.[19] Dymia's construction of community here is exclusively class-based,

[18] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London*, vi.

[19] Dymia Hsiung *Flowering Exile: An Autobiographical* Excursion (London: Peter Davies, 1952), 158.

consisting only of professional and upper classes. Yet it is certainly the case that from the 1930s to the 1950s, the Hsiungs' homes, first in London, and later in Oxford, became a significant site for transnational flows of students, artists, writers, intellectuals and diplomats from China and other Chinese-speaking territories. For those only visiting, such as Xu Beihong and his wife, the Hsiungs' homes offered convenient places to stay; for those intending to stay, their homes provided, as Dymia suggests, an informal community centre, albeit class-based, where newcomers could find help with finding housing and navigating English life.

The significance of their home for diasporic Chinese was not, however, limited to practical affairs, but also had a considerable emotional dimension, offering a sanctuary from the sometimes hostile world outside and, 'whenever people felt a little homesick', a place where they could go to feel, as one visitor said, 'as if I was home in China again'.[20] In 1931, there were an estimated 450 Chinese students in British universities, 240 from China, over half of whom were studying in London, as well as 120 from Malaya and thirty-five from Hong Kong.[21] To cater for their needs, in London, the China House in Gower Street was opened in 1933 while in Oxford, the university (where the Hsiungs' three eldest children went) had a Chinese Student Union. But arguably, these more formalised institutions could not compete with the warmth of the Hsiungs' homes. Letters in the Hsiung family archive are replete with expressions of gratitude from their visitors:

> I have to confess here one thing which I would dread to tell anyone else. I have never left home for more than one week before, and so often feel homesick even in this luxurious college life. Saturday and Sunday evenings in your home, therefore, mean a lot to me as well as to many others.[22]

Chiang was also regular visitor to the Hsiungs' home in Oxford, and was able to enjoy the lavish feasts that Dymia would prepare – of steamed egg-cakes in chicken soup, roast duck, chicken 'with Chinese sauce', braised ox-tongue, cabbage with dried shrimp and 'Chinese vermicelli', noodles with 'Chinese mushrooms', rice and beer –

[20] Hsiung, *Flowering Exile*, 92. Undated letter from Tang Sheng to S. I. Hsiung. HFA.

[21] Ng Kwee Choo, *The Chinese in London* (London: Institute of Race Relations/Oxford University Press, 1968).

[22] Letter, 7 February 1949. HFA.

which earned her the accolade of being 'the best cook of Chinese food in the whole of England'.[23] Separated from his own family, including his four children whom he sorely missed, Chiang also savoured his time with the Hsiungs' five children, especially their youngest child Deh-I and her friend Grace Lau (née Ho), whom he used to delight with his paintings of pandas. Remembering her Uncle Chiang today, Deh-I recalls his loud, hearty laugh, and the tricycle he once bought her:

> I was only about five, he asked me what I would like for Christmas. It must have been very hard [for him to get it] (during rationing, you could only get those things on the black market) and it was probably very expensive.

She also hints, however, at the Hsiungs' lack of attention to Chiang's kindness, saying 'I don't think our family fully appreciated how generous he was', raising another potential contributor to troubled relations between the two, which I explore in the final section.[24]

<C>Contesting Chineseness

I have so far discussed the relationship between Chiang and Hsiung in terms of their collaborations, recommendations, shared networks and also the element of conviviality Chiang enjoyed at the Hsiungs' as a diasporic Chinese, exiled from his home. Yet what perhaps united the two men more than anything else was their shared mission to reconfigure China and the Chinese in Western eyes. By the 1930s there were abundant books that helped to spread knowledge of Chinese society, culture and history to international audiences. However, as Chiang writes, on the studies of Chinese literature, in *The Silent Traveller in London*:

> strangely enough many sinologists do not attempt to read our new type of writing which is really easier for them, though we try to read modern English rather than Chaucer. Instead they like to stick to their privilege and remain distinct, priding themselves that they can read 'classical Chinese'. How

[23] Hsiung, *Flowering Exile*, 202. Letter from 'Robert' to S. I. Hsiung, 1945. HFA.

[24] E-mail from Deh-I Hsiung to the author, 25 June 2019.

> wonderful it is! But what a wrong conception of Chinese literature must be given to the whole world![25]

He also critiques the numerous travel books on China that he has read, as he says:

> I found these books unfair and irritating … for they laid stress on such strange sights as opium smokers, beggars, and coolies … it seemed to me that those writers were pandering to an unhealthy curiosity in their readers.

Indeed, it was these types of racialised misrepresentations that gave Chiang the idea to write his travel books. By taking up the pen, Chiang sought to enter the literary world and disrupt one of the technologies of power creating, sustaining and disseminating discourses on Chineseness. His primary tactic was, as he writes, to seek 'similarities among all kinds of people not their differences or their oddities'.[26] This strategy allows him to couch criticisms in a way that was palatable to English audiences. In the Introduction to *The Silent Traveller in London*, for example, he sets up a framework of similarity between English and Chinese misconceptions of each other's countries:

> Before I came to London, I often heard stories of it from people who had travelled there, or read of it in papers and books but these accounts were much too general and could bring no clear picture before my mind. I suppose people [in England] who hear and read about China must suffer in the same way.[27]

This, then allows him to deliver a relatively pointed critique of Western accounts of the Chinese:

> Many travellers who have gone to China for only a few months come back and write books about it, including everything from literature and philosophy to domestic and social life, and economic conditions. And some have written without having been there at all. I can only admire their temerity and their skill

[25] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London*, 112.

[26] Chiang Yee. *China Revisited: After Forty-Two Years* (Toronto: W. W. Norton, 1977), 38–39.

[27] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London*, 1–2.

in generalising on great questions.[28]

Hsiung was similarly irked that, as he wrote, the 'thousands of books in English trying to explain China' were written by self-established authorities, 'though many of them have never been to China or have been there for five minutes, not many of them can speak Chinese, [and] very few of them can read Chinese.[29] Like Chiang, Hsiung also sought to humanise the Chinese, with *Lady Precious Stream*, by adapting a love story with universal appeal. He was later delighted to point that 'Cunninghame Graham [the politician and writer] wrote to me after reading my play, that human nature is always the same, anywhere and at any time.'

However, as both men knew, misconceptions were not only spread by Sinologists or travellers, but through popular culture. In his *Silent Traveller* books, Chiang describes how, when children saw him walk by, they would sing choruses from the Orientalist musical *Chu Chin Chow* or call out 'Charlie Chan'. These preconceptions were not only voiced by children however. As Chiang writes of the predicament of the Chinese living in England: 'Some refuse to mix in circles where they would be asked many difficult questions arising from popular books and films on Chinese life'.[30] This was indeed, what continually happened to Hsiung, who wrote:

> Whenever I refused a cigarette … my host invariably apologised for not being able to supply me with a 'pipe of peace' [opium] … wherever my wife went, her feet always proved to be the chief attraction.[31]

To add insult to injury, when attempting to correct misunderstandings, Shih-I and Dymia were told that they were 'very much Westernised and could not be relied upon as good examples of *real* Chinese'.[32] As this suggests, for many, China, Chinese culture and even Chinese people remained reified in time and space, a fixed, unchanging Other. A London critic even described Chiang, as 'one of those strange

[28] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London,* 2.

[29] Shih-I Hsiung, 'The World of Today: Youth Views the Future', MS. HFA.

[30] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London,* 8.

[31] Hsiung, 'Afterthought', 186

[32] Hsiung, 'Afterthought', 186

Chinese people who "belong to an age gone by"'.[33] As for Chinese culture, commenting on attitudes to paintings by Chinese artists, Chiang declared:

> If they see a picture with one or two birds, a few trees or rocks piled together, they will certainly say that that is a lovely Chinese painting. But if they find anything like Western buildings or a modern figure there, they will suddenly say 'that is not Chinese'.[34]

Little wonder then that in his travel books, despite all their poetic reverie, Chiang repeatedly locates himself in the urban, modern city in his illustrations. In the *Silent Traveller in London,* he also describes the view of the River Thames from Richmond Park thus:

> Once I looked there far, far away and thought the river was like an endless ribbon of white satin spreading down from heaven and becoming wider and wider to the part where it was divided in two by a small island. The morning mist covered the island as if it were a fairyland where I would like to live for the rest of my life. It would be more than charming if I could ignore the sound of traffic![35]

The wistful contemplation ends with a sudden jolt, relocating the 'Chinese' in the here and now, in a way that punctures long-held fantasies of Cathay. As J. B. Priestley would later write in his Preface in the 1950 edition of the novel *Lady Precious Stream*:

> The world seems so much poorer now that the fantastic empire has gone like smoke … and now that there is merely another vast Asiatic country filled with people clamouring for cigarettes and canned goods. So I must return to those tiny windows, through which thousands of years of noisy swarming life have shrunk to one delicate budding branch, a river in the silver rain, one slit-eyed

[33] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London,* 1.

[34] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London,* 7.

[35] Chiang, *Silent Traveller in London,* 96.

sage fathoms deep in meditation, a slender nameless girl, a fish, a bird.[36]

In his public life, Hsiung was perhaps even more audacious in his attempts to relocate China and the Chinese in contemporary global culture. In response to those who questioned his authenticity as a 'real Chinese', he would retort, citing the popularity of Hollywood movies in China, 'Why, some of our women even are becoming platinum blonds!'[37]

Hsiung also sought to educate Western audiences about modern Chinese society and politics, through works such as the play *The Professor from Peking* (1939) and the novel *The Bridge of Heaven* (1943), but had only modest success. Even the writer and dramatist Lord Dunsany (1878–1957), who wrote the preface to *The Professor from Peking*, showed ambivalence towards Hsiung's decision to replace, as he writes, a 'land of dragons, peach-trees, peonies, and plum-blossoms, with its ages and ages of culture, slowly storing its dreams in green jade, porcelain, and gold' with one 'complicated by telephones, bombs and Communism'. Arguably, then, of the two writers, it is Chiang, through his strategy of mirroring the British and others rather than Hsiung's later strategy (after the popular *Lady Precious Stream*) of educating others, who had the potential for wider appeal. In Chiang's body of works, with its focus on travel writing around Britain, the 'complicated' realities of modern Chinese societies appear relatively infrequently, while Hsiung had made this a defining part of his oeuvre for many years after the success of *Lady Precious Stream*. Although Hsiung perhaps enjoyed far greater visibility in the 1930s, it is perhaps this that accounts for the greater enduring appeal of Chiang's works, which have, unlike Hsiung's, been republished several times over the years.

<D>Fracture: The economy of racial representation

When I interviewed the Hsiungs' second son, Deni Hsiung, about his father's relationship with Chiang Yee, he told me that Hsiung respected him, because, 'he saw him learning' and appreciated how 'when he first went to England, he didn't know a

[36] J. B. Priestley, 'Preface', *The Story of Lady Precious Stream* (London: Hutchinson, 1950).

[37] Shih-I Hsiung, 'Afterthought' in *The Professor of Peking: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Methuen,1939), 163–98: 186; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 2 November 1935.

word of English almost, at all, and it was by sheer great effort that he made himself a writer.' Yet, in the words of Wei Hsiung, Deni's own son, during the same interview, 'towards the end of their lives they despised each other'.[38] While Deni and Wei made sense of the deteroriation of their relationship with reference to their different personalities – Hsiung 'irresponsible' and Chiang 'methodical' – they also stated that Hsiung held disparaging views about his friend's works. While not directly attributing specific comments to their father but referring to wider views among Chinese intellectuals in Britain at the time, they recounted stories that Chiang 'wrote for the English people', that his works were deemed 'interesting' but that there was 'no literary genius behind it'. Together they also spoke of how Deni had attended a posthumous exhibition of Chiang's works in Beijing, where a mutual friend had said:

> It's a shame to have an exhibition *at all* here! I mean, *how* can this be called "Chinese painting"? How can these be called "Chinese art"? These are destined for a foreign public. It's a shame to have an exhibition at all, here in Beijing, in China, everybody would know it's a joke.

As I have written elsewhere however, there were also many Chinese in Britain who were equally disparaging about *Lady Precious Stream*.[39] Interestingly, many of their reasons echo precisely those criticisms that Hsiung himself aimed at Chiang. Modernisers such as Xiao Qian (1910–1999) denounced Hsiung for creating a romanticised version of 'Old Cathay' to pander to Western tastes, and, despite Hsiung's own Nationalist sympathies, 'Kuomintang purists' claimed that, in doing so, he was 'indirectly helping to stultify the rebirth of the nation'.[40] Conservative artists and poets also felt ambivalent, but for different reasons. Hsiung's close friends, the calligrapher and first secretary of the embassy Ho Sze Ko and his wife, the poet Lily Ho, felt that his calligraphy, poetry and knowledge of Chinese literature was not 'as high cultured as it could be'. Their views of him were also 'tinged with disapproval because he was famous for selling his work', which, they felt, contravened Confucian

[38] Interview with Deni Xiong and Wei Hsiung, 5 March 2006, Beijing.

[39] Yeh, *The Happy Hsiungs.*

[40] Barbara Whittingham-Jones, *China Fights in Britain: A Factual Survey of a Fascinating Colony in Our Midst* (London: Allen, 1944), 48.

principles.[41] In other Chinese circles, as his son Deni acknowledged, Hsiung's cultivation of his image – wearing traditional Chinese gowns and keeping his hair long – also prompted 'nasty remarks'.[42] With the success of *Lady Precious Stream*, many became 'envious because he had all this glory, all this publicity'.[43]

It is also notable that their fractured relationship was certainly not unique among this circle of elite diasporic Chinese. For example, as Morris Gest (1875–1942), the impresario who took *Lady Precious Stream* to Broadway, wrote to Hsiung:

> What makes me mad is that when I went to see the Chinese Consul, K. C. Lee and others and begged them to take "Lady Precious Stream" and help the Chinese people, they wouldn't. I think, Dr. Hsiung, they were too jealous of you and never gave you credit for making the American people Chinese-conscious.[44]

Rivalry with Lin Yutang (1895–1976), another celebrated diasporic Chinese writer of the time who was based in the USA, is also hinted at in the writings of Hsiung's friends. Proposing that Hsiung produce a book of collected autobiographical essays, the writer Benjamin Ifor Evans (1899–1982) commented, 'If you could use all your highly individual and subtle use of English we could make it the book of the season and Lin Yu Tang ... would have to retreat to the shadows'.[45]

Though written by Hsiung's non-Chinese friend, the somewhat Machiavellian tones of this comment capture an underlying dimension of relations among this group of elite Chinese intellectuals in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s that could threaten the conviviality, collaboration and solidarity so necessary to their lives as writers and diasporic Chinese. In a political economy of racial representation, where only a limited number of Chinese artists or writers were admitted to visibility, but were burdened with representing their 'culture' or nation, competition over who was granted access to representation and contestations over what kind of Chineseness was

[41] Interview with Grace Lau, 12 July 2005, London.

[42] Interview with Deni Xiong and Wei Hsiung, 5 March 2006.

[43] Interview with Grace Lau, 12 July 2005, London.

[44] Letter from Morris Gest to S. I. Hsiung, 25 January 1939. HFA.

[45] Letter from B. Ifor Evans to S. I. Hsiung, 9 January 1949.

represented became so acute as to undo the laborious work of making a community in diaspora.

<E>Conclusion

As this chapter has highlighted, the Hsiungs, especially Shih-I, played a significant role in both Chiang Yee's career and personal life. Sharing not only status as privileged diasporic Chinese, but also origins in the same province, and aspirations to become popular literary figures, their paths were bound together in multiple ways. From the everyday practicalities of negotiating life and a sense of belonging in a new society, to becoming embedded in the elite social and literary circles of 1930s to 1950s Britain, and seeking to challenge racialised perceptions of the Chinese circulating in Europe and the USA, the Hsiungs and Chiang supported one another, progressed each other's careers and forged emotional near kinship ties. Despite this, the economy of racial representation of diasporic Chinese cultural producers in 1930s Britain impacted severely on their friendship, fracturing their mutuality, conviviality and even throwing into doubt the strength of their shared political solidarity. Instead, the few spaces granted to only those who offered specific representations of often highly exoticised Chineseness that appealed to British audiences led not only Chiang and Hsiung, but also many other diasporic Chinese literary figures in their circles as the time to confront each other as competitors, rather than allies in a political struggle. In this sense, solidarities were ruptured, diminishing collective resistance and perpetuating the dehumanisation of the Chinese by rendering invisible highly differentiated and complex identities, and, in the end, tearing apart otherwise deep connections laboriously made from fragile ties of shared social location as diasporic Chinese.