

Rohmer's 'Orient' – Pulp Orientalism?

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Introduction

One of the criticisms of Edward Said was that his 1978 “book *Orientalism* took no account of pulp fiction”.¹ This article looks at the mental map of the Orient, images of the ‘East’, various parts of Asia presented through the pulp fictions of Sax Rohmer (1883–1959); an impressive writer in terms of volume and longevity, even if not of literary quality! For over half a century, his works fed images of the Orient in general, and aspects of the Orient (China and the Chinese, the Middle East and Islam/Muslims, and Oriental women), to his mass readership in the UK and the USA. In looking at these generalities and aspects, the question arises of how far Rohmer’s material did, or did not, reflect Said’s sense of “Orientalism”? In retrospect, Rohmer’s material was “pulp Orientalism” of the first order.²

Images of the Orient

Rohmer may have written that “the glamour of the East was very real to me ... Near or Far, the East has a call which, once heard can never be forgotten, and never be unheeded”; but this glamour came with uncomfortable images for Rohmer’s readers to heed.³ There was a basic mystery, a certain alien quality to the Orient. Rohmer acknowledged in his novels “the mystery of the East”, and “the mysterious East”; whilst in interviews it was a sense from him that “mystery has always walled the East”.⁴ This echoed similar images elsewhere, from Claude Jarvis’ *The Back Garden of Allah* (1939) for example, that “since the day of the Arabian Nights, the East has always been the home of the inexplicable”.⁵ Such a wall of mystery left a gulf between East and West in Rohmer’s portrayals; a “strange Oriental background ... a mode of life divorced from all ideals of Western culture”.⁶ One device used

¹ Robert Irwin, “Popular Culture, Orientalism, and Edward Said”, 7. See Irwin’s wider study, *For Lust of Knowing: the Orientalists and their Enemies*.

² Idem, “Pulp Orientalism.”

³ Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 196.

⁴ Idem, *Fire Tongue*, 244; idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 75; idem, “The Birth of Fu Manchu.”

⁵ Claude Jarvis, *The Back Garden of Allah*, 10.

⁶ Sax Rohmer, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 101.

by Rohmer was the binary refrain in Kipling's famous *Ballad of East and West* (1889), "East is West, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". Rohmer referred to this in his novels; for example, "I learned as your Rudyard Kipling has also learned that 'East is East', and 'I will quote Kipling: 'East is East and West is West'"⁷.

Oriental mystery had certain connotations and elaborations surrounding it for Rohmer. One connotation for Rohmer was secretiveness; "this Oriental environment ... the secret land which has bred so many mysteries"⁸. Rohmer's sense and emphasis on the mysterious nature of Asia reflected Charles Low's contemporaneous sense in *Secret Asia* (1939) of "to many people, the age-old mysteriousness of that secret Asia"⁹. The mystery of the land came for Rohmer from the secretive nature of its inhabitants. Orientals were "silent subtle peoples", "all Eastern peoples are subtle and secretive"; reflecting their "true Oriental stealth" and "the guile of the East"¹⁰. In turn, stealth and guile had the connotation of deviousness; "scratch the veneer and one found the sandalwood of the Orient, perfumed, seductive, appealing, but something to be shunned as brittle and untrustworthy"¹¹. This reflected the "sinister Oriental" fiction genre.¹² Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1917) similarly included negative sentiments of the East; "of all creeping things that creep upon the earth, the most insidious is the Oriental in the West"¹³. Rohmer saw "a Western resentment of that insidious Eastern power"¹⁴.

Another connotation surrounding mystery was uncertainty, and from uncertainty the danger of the unknown. This was Rohmer's nightmares of "strange, Oriental horrors"; of "the horrors that lay hidden behind the mists of the East"¹⁵. This was "the invisible menace" found in the Orient that Rohmer talked off.¹⁶ The Orient represented "the coming of strange things, and the dawn of a new power; which should set up secret standards in England, which should flood Europe and the civilized world"¹⁷. This was not just psychological, it was political power; "secret influences at work to overthrow the Indian Empire, to place, it might be, the whole of Europe and America beneath an Eastern rule"¹⁸. Race and duplicity were invoked

⁷ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 171; idem, *Tales of Chinatown*, 282. In Rohmer, *Bat Wing*, 133, he describes this line as "Kipling's dictum".

⁸ Idem, *Fire Tongue*, 23.

⁹ Charles Low, *Secret Asia*, 9.

¹⁰ Sax Rohmer, *Fire Tongue*, 23; idem, *The Sins of Severac Bablon*, 137; idem, *Grey Face*, 253; idem, *The Golden Scorpion*, 226.

¹¹ Idem, *Tales of Chinatown*, 70.

¹² Robin Winks, "The Sinister Oriental: Thriller Fiction and the Asian Scene," 49–61.

¹³ Thomas Burke, *Limehouse Nights. Tales of Chinatown*, 30.

¹⁴ Rohmer, *The Sins of Severac Bablon*, 46, in this case Jewish "Eastern" power.

¹⁵ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 67; idem, *Sins of Sumeru*, 18.

¹⁶ Idem, *Fire Tongue*, 16, 67.

¹⁷ Idem, *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper*, 12.

¹⁸ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 194.

by Rohmer; “a monstrous conspiracy to subject the Western races to domination by the East”.¹⁹ Rohmer’s readers were asked “can you not imagine a kind of Oriental society which like a great, a formidable serpent, lies hidden somewhere below that deceptive jungle of the East? These are troubled times ... can you not imagine a dreadful sudden menace?”²⁰

In terms of troubled times, a general sense of “imperial crisis” underlay Rohmer’s work before and after World War I.²¹ Rohmer’s sense in 1913 was of “the awakening of the East”.²² This Oriental awakening was a common perception in the West. John Jones reckoned in 1908 that “a deep spirit of unrest ... is but a part of the new awakening of the East”.²³ Henry Hyndman’s *The Awakening of Asia* (1919) portrayed a problematic Asia “beginning to react consciously against the domination of the West over the East ... in the changing course of time we may yet have good cause to fear Asians again”.²⁴ In the 1930s, it was the case of Rohmer’s villains warning readers; “your present English government is blind. You will lose Egypt as you have lost India. A great federation of Eastern States ... is destined to take the place once held by the British Empire”.²⁵ At the end of his lifetime, it was still a case of Rohmer’s Oriental villains proclaiming, and threatening that “the dusk of the West has fallen. The dawn of the East has come”.²⁶

Transnational groupings, secret societies spanning the Orient were deployed by Rohmer; “the Si-Fan, which, if I am not mistaken, is a sort of Eleusinian Mystery holding some kind of dominion over the eastern mind, and boasting initiates throughout the Orient”.²⁷ In *The Daughter of Fu Manchu* (1931) it was Fu Manchu and Sheikh Ismail heading the Council of Seven. In *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), Fu Manchu was still working in Cairo to harness an Islamic *jihad* against the West.²⁸ A quarter of a century later, in *Re-enter Dr Fu Manchu* (1957), Rohmer described the joint operations of Fu Manchu and Seyyid Mohammed; the former telling the latter, “how little they suspect, Mohammad, that we and not they, hold the east in our hands”.²⁹ Samuel Huntington speculated in his *Clash of Civilizations* (1993) thesis about how a “Confucian-Islamic connection has emerged to challenge

¹⁹ Idem, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 307.

²⁰ Idem, *The Golden Scorpion*, 142.

²¹ Rebecca Wingfield, “Gazing on Fu-Manchu: Obscurity and Imperial Crisis in the Work of Sax Rohmer,” 81–97.

²² Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 22. The phrase was used in Pierre Leroy-Beaulieu’s *The Awakening of the East* (1900). See also Jay Weinstein, “Fu Manchu and the Third World,” 77–82.

²³ John Jones, *India. Its Life and Thought*, 1.

²⁴ Henry Hyndman, *The Awakening of Asia*, 264, 266.

²⁵ Sax Rohmer, *Daughter of Fu Manchu*, 242.

²⁶ Idem, *Re-enter Dr Fu Manchu*, 182.

²⁷ Idem, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 69.

²⁸ Reeva Simon, *Spies and Holy Wars. The Middle East in 20th-Century Crime Fiction*, ch. 3, “Holy War and Empire: Fu Manchu in Cairo,” 32–49.

²⁹ Sax Rohmer, *Re-enter Dr Fu Manchu*, 55.

Western interests, values and power”; but this scenario had been prefigured in Rohmer’s earlier creations.³⁰

The mysterious Orient was also, at times, an exotic attraction of sensual allure; “the taunting smile of the East, which is at once a caress and an invitation ... the luresome, caressing smile of the East”.³¹ Consequently, Rohmer’s Western figures expectantly travelled East; “how keenly also I was to romance of any sort, providing it wore the guise of the Orient”.³² However, sensual allure could then slide into the decadence and depravity of “the numerous and exotic vices which have sprung from the soil of the Orient”.³³

A frequent setting for such exotic vices was drugs, in which the allure of the Orient was ready to lure and entrap the unwary Westerner; be they opium dens in Rohmer’s China-related stories, or the hashishin groups in his Middle East-related stories.³⁴ In Rohmer’s *The Yellow Claw* (1915), Mahara “The Lady of the [Opium] Poppies” (accompanied by a “Chinaman with “the face of a leering satyr”) was a half Burmese “Eastern girl, slight and supple, and having a devilish and evil grace ... a lascivious smile was made to greet the spectator”.³⁵ Rohmer’s book *Dope* (1919) involved Middle Eastern and Chinese drug dealers luring Westerners into their embrace. Despite official banning of such drugs, Rohmer’s picture was of a “realist who knew his Orient from the inside ... aware that practices such as slave dealing, those of the thugs, the dacoits and the hashishin had long ago ceased – officially, but not otherwise”.³⁶ Dope use was also a seedbed for “Oriental meekness” and inertia; where “long residence in the East has rendered me something of a fatalist”.³⁷ It was no surprise that Oriental dope often went along with Oriental decadence. This was also reflected in Riza Bey’s *Darkest Orient* (1937) which spanned Port Said, hashish assassins, opium dens, and Chinese brothels - in similar ways to Rohmer’s panorama.

Binary divisions abounded from Rohmer. Drug-facilitated passivity, “the languor of the Orient” was juxtaposed with Western activism; “passivity ... that Eastern resignation ... it must be combated”.³⁸ Oriental backwardness was the opposite of Western sophistication; “superstition is never very far below the surface in even the most cultured Oriental”.³⁹ In turn, Eastern immorality and cruelty was juxtaposed

³⁰ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” 46.

³¹ Sax Rohmer, *The Golden Scorpion*, 162, 224.

³² Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 200.

³³ Idem, *The Yellow Claw*, 172. Sascha Auerbach noted that *The Yellow Claw* “was rife with Orientalism”, as exemplified in its depiction of the “languorous sensuality of the Orient”, *Race, Law, and the Chinese Puzzle in Imperial Britain*, 110.

³⁴ E.g. Gary Hoppenstand, “Yellow Devil Doctors and Opium Dens: A Survey of Yellow Peril Stereotypes in Mass Media Entertainment,” 277–91; the title “devil doctor” referring to Fu Manchu, whose drug dens were to be found in China, the Middle East, Britain and America.

³⁵ Sax Rohmer, *The Yellow Claw*, 255.

³⁶ Idem, *Egyptian Nights*, 107.

³⁷ Idem, *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper*, 39, 21.

³⁸ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 275; idem, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 36.

³⁹ Idem, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 95.

with Western morality. This ranged from the implicit “the cruel crudity of the East stood at the elbow of the most polite West”, to the explicit “inherent cruelty only possible in one of Oriental race ... black Eastern devilry, something too of the Eastern climate”.⁴⁰ This compares with Dennis Wheatley’s generalization in *The Eunuch of Istanbul* (1935) about a Turk being “so completely Oriental—subtle, shrewd, sadistic”.⁴¹ It was all a matter for Rohmer of “oriental voluptuousness and cruelty ... Musk, Hashish, and Blood”.⁴² Criminality in China was “peculiarly and horribly Eastern ... Oriental devilry”.⁴³

Images of the Middle East, Islam and Arabs

Rohmer’s images of the Middle East, of Islam and of the Arabs, contained the uncertainties and unknowabilities already discernible with his general portrayal of the Orient. In Egypt, there was “the indescribable atmosphere ... the shadowy mystery” of the land.⁴⁴ Egypt was “a mysterious world”, an “old, secret land”.⁴⁵ Egypt was also a land in which “the Egyptian ... is yet a child a heart”.⁴⁶ Rohmer esteemed Egyptian civilization, but in its older pre-Islamic forms; “that wonderful civilization which flourished under the Pharaoh’s ... the ancient grandeur of Egypt”.⁴⁷ His own travels had taken him through Egypt, Palestine and Syria; his travels feeding back into his fictional portrayals of the area and its people, culture and religion.

Drug usage, hashish, was an integral feature of Rohmer’s Middle East. As Rohmer correctly noted, the hashishin had been founded as an Ismaili offshoot within Islam by Hassan of Khorassan. Rohmer portrayed it as still continuing under the rule of Hassan of Aleppo, “the Sheikh-al-jebal, or supreme lord of the Hashishin”; a “weird group of fanatics – survivals of a dim and evil past”.⁴⁸ Sources cited by Rohmer to recreate this hashish-ridden Middle East included Baynard Taylor’s *The Land of the Saracens* (1855).⁴⁹ This remained the sense in contemporaries like Henry de Montfried’s *Hashish* (1935) travel recollections of “the stupendous secret organizations which controlled the smuggling of the drug” in the Middle East.⁵⁰

The Middle East was the setting for encounters with the mysteries of *and* behind the veil inside and outside the harem walls. The “harem fantasy” had been a potent

⁴⁰ Idem, *White Velvet*, 325; idem, *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper*, 102.

⁴¹ Dennis Wheatley, *The Eunuch of Stamboul*, 196.

⁴² Sax Rohmer, *Dope*, 154.

⁴³ Idem, *Tales of Chinatown*, 164.

⁴⁴ Idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 88.

⁴⁵ Idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 6; *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 83.

⁴⁶ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 33.

⁴⁷ Idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 57.

⁴⁸ Idem, *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper*, 28, 51.

⁴⁹ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 206–8.

⁵⁰ Henry de Monfreid, *Hashish* (1935), 267.

image of the Orient for many Orientalist commentators and fiction writers.⁵¹ As Rohmer put it; “there is a maxim in the East – ‘Avoid the veil’”, which went alongside “soft glances from the Harem window” and illicit romances.⁵² It was “the mystery of dark eyes peeping from a *mushhrabiyah* lattice that constitutes the love lure of the east ... mysterious—tempting, taunting, unfathomable”.⁵³

Such female mystery spurred on Rohmer’s male protagonists. The first depiction of Nahemah, “The Lily of Damascus” was striking:

A slim figure glided out on the deck, and began to advance toward me. It proved to be that of a woman or girl dressed in clinging black silk, and wearing a *yashmak* [veil]! ... In that coy half light she presented a dazzlingly beautiful picture. It was my first sight of a *yashmak* ... she appealed to me in a way that was new, and almost irresistible; it was an appeal quite Oriental—sensuous, indescribable.⁵⁴

As such, she was described as “an illustrated page of the *Arabian Nights* ... an oval Oriental outline ... this *harem* lily”.⁵⁵ Potent images of the harem also surfaced with Zara el-Khala (‘Flower of the Desert’), the daughter of a Frenchwoman and of Wali of Aleppo, in which Zara had “embraced Islam and entered his [Wali’s] *harem* in the great house on the outskirts of Aleppo”.⁵⁶ Yet ambiguities revolved around Zara, with the odalisque (harem slave girl) image potent; “She is an Oriental and does not enjoy the same freedom as a European woman ... in the middle of Bohemianism she remained secluded as an odalisque in some *harem* garden of Stambul ... One little point her existence seems to strengthen: that we are dealing with Easterns”.⁵⁷ Similar harem slave imagery surrounded another female figure, Karamaneh, immediately portrayed by Rohmer as “dressed in the gauzy silks of the harem”.⁵⁸ She “was arrayed in gossamer silk which more than indicated the perfect lines of her slim shape; wore a jewelled girdle and barbaric ornaments; was a figure fit for the walled [harem] gardens of Stamboul—a figure amazing, incomprehensible”.⁵⁹ Zara el-Khala (‘Flower of the Desert’) was “the slim beauty of the East ... reminiscent of the *harem*”.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*. Also Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem. Images of Subconscious Eroticism*, “in this Orientalism ... emerges, the very embodiment of the obsession: the harem”, 3; Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan’s Court. European Fantasies of the East*, 141–46.

⁵² Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 60.

⁵³ Idem, “The Treasure of Taia” (1926), rep. in *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 5, 182.

⁵⁴ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 199, 202–3. Ironically this “Lily of Damascus” turned out to be a Frenchwoman in disguise!

⁵⁵ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 244–45.

⁵⁶ Idem, *The Golden Scorpion*, 157.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁸ Idem, *The Return of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 119.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 121–22.

⁶⁰ Sax Rohmer, *The Golden Scorpion*, 24.

Harem transgressions could take a more unsettling racial development when it involved white women.⁶¹ Its shadow reached back into the West; hence the Oriental dope dens encountered in London's Chinatown by Rohmer's Englishwoman Mollie Clayton:

These cubicles were identical in shape ... containing rugs, a silken divan, an armchair, and a low, Eastern table ... "The idea of undressing and reclining on these divans in real oriental fashion," declared Mollie, giggling, "makes me feel that I am an odalisque already. I have dreamed that I was an odalisque, dear—after smoking, you know" ... And now that evil spirit of abandonment came to Rita ... moral reluctance, departed ... It was as though something in the faintly perfumed atmosphere of the place had entered into her blood, driving out reserve and stifling conscience.⁶²

This involvement of white women as harem slave girls could, in some stories, be as a result of kidnapping. The Harem Agency operated in London's East End by Ali of Cairo "the biggest slave-dealer in the East"; from where "they reached the hands of many an opulent and abandoned 'profiteer' of Damascus, Stambul ... hundred of pretty girls disappear from their homes ... English beauty is popular".⁶³ Slave traders from the East were the ultimate racial nightmare for the White West. Hence the depiction of Faramy Bey, an Arab-Turkish drug dealer to white women; "he looks me up and down as though wandering what price I would fetch in the slave market, I know. But that's just his Eastern blood".⁶⁴

Nevertheless, in racial terms, the Arab was not quite pilloried by Rohmer in the sustained way that the Chinese were to be. Indeed, Rohmer's Western readers could take "a lesson that anyone susceptible to truth learns in Egypt ... an unpleasant sense of inferiority in the company of this dignified, placid, yet majestic Arab".⁶⁵ This comment came with his portrayal of Hassan es-Sugra as a "grave, graceful philosopher".⁶⁶ Another figure positively portrayed was Bimbashi Baruk, an "exotic" Egyptian intelligence officer in the Camel Corps.⁶⁷ He crossed the racial boundaries through his mixed race background. The Bimbashi was a "product of the harem and the public school ... the son of a sheikh of pure lineage by his English wife"; but yet there lay the twist that in him "there ran in his veins the blood of Moslem captains who had slain the infidel and spared not".⁶⁸

⁶¹ Lucy Bland, "White Women and Men of Colour: Miscegenation Fears in Britain after the Great War," 29–61.

⁶² Sax Rohmer, *Dope*, 152.

⁶³ Idem, *Tales of Chinatown*, 189.

⁶⁴ Idem, *White Velvet*, 70.

⁶⁵ Idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 93.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 224. In Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, Hassan es-Sugra is described as a "trusted employee of the British Archaeological Society", and "a man of integrity", 36–37.

⁶⁷ Sax Rohmer, *Egyptian Nights*, 16–17.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 186, 16.

Rohmer's images of Islam contained historical images wrapped up in future political portents. Islam was often portrayed as backward and archaic, "ignorance ... is bred in the blood of the Moslem".⁶⁹ Abu Tabah was described in such a fashion; "this representative of Islam, this living illustration of the Arabian Nights ... the medieval Orient to which he properly belonged".⁷⁰ In the interplay between Islam and the West, the image of "Moslem fanatics" raised its head from Rohmer's pen.⁷¹ This could be through the drug linkage; a "fierce hatred of all humanity, inflamed to madness by the Eastern drug, hashish, and directed against the enemies of Islam".⁷² Religious fanaticism might express itself over minor relics, the slipper of Mohammed for example in Rohmer's story *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper* (1919). Muslim fanaticism was also portrayed by Rohmer as part of a wider hostility; "the Prophet taught that we should smite the infidel ... there are fierce Believers, a-lust for the blood of the infidel".⁷³ In such a vein, Rohmer painted a picture of Islamic revival which threatened the political interests of Britain; "a wave of fanaticism will sometimes pass through" the Arabian tribes "and then they go Mad Hatter".⁷⁴

Other novelists were drawn to this theme. In 1909, Hall Caine's *The White Prophet* deployed the image of "Allah-intoxicated fanatics who would cut off your head".⁷⁵ The politics of Islamist revival was vividly depicted in John Buchan's novel *Greenmantle* (1916). Its warning was that "Persian Moslems are threatening trouble. There is a dry wind blowing through the East, and the parched grasses wait the spark. And that wind is blowing towards the Indian border"; for "Islam is a fighting creed, and the mullah still stands in the pulpit with the Koran in one hand and a drawn sword in the other".⁷⁶ It is also interesting to read how Basil Matthews' *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations* was published in 1926. Returning to novelists, Wheatley's *The Eunuch of Stamboul* (1935) maintained this concern about Islam. It was set in Turkey, where "the lust of massacring Christians is in the blood of every Turk".⁷⁷ The "revival of [Islamic] religious fanaticism would mean certain trouble for Great Britain".⁷⁸ More specifically, for Wheatley it

⁶⁹ Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 229.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷¹ Sax Rohmer, *The Quest of the Sacred Slipper*, 30.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39, 62.

⁷⁴ Sax Rohmer, *She Who Sleeps*, 130.

⁷⁵ Hall Caine, *The White Prophet*, 5.

⁷⁶ John Buchan, *Greenmantle*, 6, 7. Also see Ahmed Al-Rawi, 'Islam and the East in John Buchan's Novels', 117–27; Reeva Simon, "Spies and Holy War: *Jihad* and World War I," *Spies and Holy Wars*, ch. 2, 14–31. Said post-*Orientalism* made the linkage; "many of the stereotypes of Islamic sensuality, sloth, fatalism, cruelty, degradation and splendor to be found in writers from John Buchan to V.S. Naipaul are also presuppositions underlying the adjoining field of academic Orientalism." Edward Said, "Orientalism: An Exchange."

⁷⁷ Dennis Wheatley, *The Eunuch of Stamboul*, 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

was *jihad* “with all its terrible possibilities ... for a Jihad meant the preaching of a Holy War ... [Muslim] co-religionists would probably rise in sympathy and begin massacres of Europeans in India, Syria, Palestine”.⁷⁹

Rohmer's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) returned to this theme of *jihad*; “Holy War in the East”, reflecting “waves of fanaticism”.⁸⁰ In Rohmer's story this was being preached by a “fanatical imam ... throughout the east, sweeping the infidel before him. That movement is gathering strength ... and I need not tell you what such a movement means to the Indian government, and what it may come to mean for Arabia, Palestine ... unless it can be checked”.⁸¹ In 1944, Rohmer's image of the Grand Imam of Khorassan (an Ayatollah Khomeini type of figure?) again re-emphasised the threat posed from an Islam seeking to recover past glories, an Islam seeking to “purge the East of Western influence and restore in all its grandeur the ancient Arab empire”.⁸² It was a question for Rohmer of “a Holy War, nothing less”.⁸³ Under such a *jihad*, “the glory of Islam ... would be fully restored when no European foot rested upon Eastern soil ... the Faithful to cast out their despoilers ... every Believer to sweep the infidel out of the lands of Islam.”⁸⁴ Islamist jihadist challenges to the West was not just a post 9/11 phenomenon, Rohmer had already suggested it.

Images of China and the Chinese

The generalities of the Orient were also applicable to China. The “land of mystery – China”; as well its inhabitants, “that most inscrutably mysterious race, the Chinese”, for “the Chinaman presents an inscrutable mystery ... as a creature apart”.⁸⁵ Chinese communities outside China were profiled by Rohmer. His Chinatowns tended to merge into one another; a transnational Chinese threat from below, as “larger conglomerates of (almost invariably negative) ‘Oriental’ characteristics”.⁸⁶ The starting point for these profiles were Rohmer's unsettling *Tales of Chinatown* (1917) and *Dope: Tales of Chinatown and the Drug Traffic* (1919), set in London's Limehouse. This Chinatown was described by one of Rohmer's White protagonist John Durham in binary terms; “he [Durham] had crossed the borderline dividing West from East and was now in an Oriental town”.⁸⁷ Rohmer's portrayal of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁸⁰ Sax Rohmer, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 293, 295.

⁸¹ Ibid., 25–26.

⁸² Sax Rohmer, *Egyptian Nights*, 207.

⁸³ Ibid., 203.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 209–10.

⁸⁵ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 307, 58; idem, *Dope*, 100.

⁸⁶ Ruth Mayer, “‘The Greatest Novelty of the Age’: Fu Manchu, Chinatown, and the Global City.” In Vanessa Kunnemann and Ruth Mayer, eds., *Chinatowns in a Transnational World. Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*, 116–34.

⁸⁷ Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Chinatown*, 14.

Limehouse can also be compared with Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1916) and *More Limehouse Nights* (1921), as well as Henry Morton portrayals of Limehouse in *The Nights of London* (1926).⁸⁸ While Rohmer never visited China, his own encounters in Chinatown form an internal travel setting which fed back into his fiction. For Rohmer, Limehouse was a "haze of Oriental mystery ... a secret quarter and as strange, in its smaller way, as its parent in China", and with "sordid mystery which seems to underlie the whole of this dingy quarter".⁸⁹

Such mystery could be devious for Rohmer; "the Chinese ... the most mysterious and most cunning people in the world".⁹⁰ They were "furtive".⁹¹ China was an alien land; a "secret China", in which "no white man, I honestly believe, appreciates the unemotional cruelty of the Chinese".⁹² Culturally, "Chinese institutions and ideals are alien from those of the rest of the civilized world".⁹³

Rohmer's materials on China and the Chinese showed an "unrelenting Sinophobia" and "incessant vilification of the Chinese" in his "unabashed China-bashing" works.⁹⁴ His audience was receptive to such themes; in popular fiction "it is astonishing to what extent the Chinese fired the imagination of the British public during the half century up to about 1940"; and "it is no exaggeration to suggest that the images of the Chinese circulated through his [Rohmer's] stories, books and magazines were central to the popular imagining of them in British society".⁹⁵ Sinophobia was a strong theme in American fiction as well, as with Jack London's *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1907).⁹⁶

Typical threatening Chinese figures of Rohmer's time had been created by Matthew Shiel; Yen How in *The Yellow Danger* (1900), and Li Yu Ku in *The Dragon* (1913). London theatre goers also encountered another Chinese villain in Maurice Vernon and Harold Owen's *Mr Wu* which opened in the Strand in November 1913. Rohmer contributed his own Oriental villains like Dr King, Fo Hi, the "Black Mandarin", Yu'an Hee See; and above all in 1913 Fu Manchu "the evil of the East incarnate".⁹⁷

⁸⁸ See Anne Witchard, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie. Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown*, 4 for comparisons with Rohmer.

⁸⁹ Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Chinatown*, 23, 13; idem, *Dope*, 347.

⁹⁰ Idem, *The Yellow Claw*, 369.

⁹¹ Idem, *Yellow Shadows*, 64.

⁹² Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 98.

⁹³ Idem, *Dope*, 166.

⁹⁴ Urmila Seshagiri, "Modernity's (Yellow) Perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English Race Paranoia," 174; Karen Kingsbury, "Yellow Peril, Dark Hero: Fu Manchu and the 'Gothic Bedevilment' of Racist Intent," 108, 105.

⁹⁵ Michael Diamond, *Lesser Breeds: Racial Attitudes in Popular British Fiction, 1890-1940*, 12. Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and the Chinese Puzzle in Imperial Britain*, 80.

⁹⁶ William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940*; Patrick Sharp, "The Great White 'Race Adventure': Jack London and the Yellow Peril," 89-97.

⁹⁷ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 285.

The context was simple but strong; the yellow peril “geopolitics of fear” imagery that was so noticeable at the start of the twentieth century.⁹⁸ The prefix “yellow” scattered Rohmer’s works in a frequently negative fashion and “yellow shadows” permeated his works.⁹⁹ Rohmer was well aware of racial anxieties in the real world; “the phantom Yellow Peril to-day materializes under the very eyes of the Western world”.¹⁰⁰ It was no coincidence that Percy Westerman’s *When East Meets West, A Story of the Yellow Peril* (1913), an account of the Boxer Rebellion, was published the same year as Rohmer’s first book on Fu Manchu appeared. Rohmer acknowledged this Boxer connection; “conditions for launching a Chinese villain on the market were ideal ... The Boxer Rebellion had started off rumors of a Yellow Peril which had not yet died down”.¹⁰¹ It is no surprise then to have the term “Yellow Peril” deployed five times in Rohmer’s first Fu Manchu book, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu* (1913), and once again in *The Return of Dr Fu-Manchu* (1916). In Rohmer’s third Fu Manchu book, *The Si-Fan Mysteries* (1917), it was reiterated about “a giant Yellow Empire ... what millions of Europeans and Americans call ‘the Yellow peril’”.¹⁰²

Rohmer was aware of the lineage of such Yellow Peril material and images. One source used by Rohmer had been Brett Harte’s poem *The Heathen Chinees* (1870), and its refrain of “for ways that are dark/ And for tricks that are vain,/ The heathen Chinees is peculiar”.¹⁰³ Ironic or not, its negative portrayal was picked up and frequently recycled in the West. For Rohmer, it was a question that “the ‘Heathen Chinees,’ forgotten now as literature, undoubtedly created a thought-form which survives to this day”.¹⁰⁴ In an admission of the power of imagery, Rohmer went on to muse that “thoughts are things—a subject upon which I could enlarge—and the thing created by Bret Harte still walks among us although the words which gave it birth are forgotten”.¹⁰⁵

Another backdrop for Rohmer was Rudyard Kipling. Already, Rohmer’s repeated use of Kipling’s famous line “East is East and West is West” has been noted. Kipling’s sinophobia was strongly evident in his travel writings *From Sea to Sea* (1900). This included what he called “The Chinese Question”; underpinned by

⁹⁸ David Glover, “Die Gelbe Gefahr, le Peril Jaune, Yellow Peril: The Geopolitics of a Fear,” 47–59. Also Stanford Lyman, “The ‘Yellow Peril’ Mystique: Origins and Vicissitudes of a Racist Discourse,” 683–747.

⁹⁹ John Colombo, “Sax Rohmer and His Yellow Shadows,” 43–57. This echoes the title of Rohmer’s *Yellow Shadows* (1925).

¹⁰⁰ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 76. See Thomas Cogan, “Western Images of Asia: Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril,” 37–64.

¹⁰¹ Cay Ash and Elizabeth Rohmer, *Master of Villainy: A Biography of Sax Rohmer*, 75.

¹⁰² Sax Rohmer, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 17.

¹⁰³ Robert Druce, “The ‘Heathen Chinees’ and the ‘Yellow Peril’: Pseudo-Chinoiserie in Popular Fiction,” 131–59 for the progression from Harte to Rohmer.

¹⁰⁴ Sax Rohmer, “The Birth of Fu Manchu”.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Kipling's admission of his own "horror of the Chinese – of their inhumanness and their inscrutability".¹⁰⁶ Rohmer's description of a Chinese opium den involved "a sense of nausea ... disgusting atmosphere ... I was as one dropped 'Somewhere East of Suez, where the best is like the worst, And there ain't no Ten Commandments' ... it was like a glimpse of the Inferno seen by some Chinese Dante ... something unnatural, inhuman".¹⁰⁷ This citation "Somewhere East of Suez, where the best is like the worst, And there ain't no Ten Commandments" came from Kipling's poem *Road to Mandalay* (1892).

Fu Manchu was Rohmer's most famous creation; with Rohmer rhetorically asking what was Fu Manchu; "a man? A fiend! A demon or a myth"?¹⁰⁸ His creation had "political appeal", in which the character mixed "stereotype" and "sensationalism".¹⁰⁹ Rohmer's "electric combination of journalistic style, real-world locations, and global racial terror would fascinate legions of devoted readers, including U.S. President Calvin Coolidge".¹¹⁰ Rohmer had his ongoing forebodings, which were recalled by him in 1938:

So, you see, I had really created Dr. Fu Manchu. I had *set* him out upon his great march to conquer the Western world. I had challenged him to sweep aside the white races and to win domination for his own. Since thoughts are things, perhaps in my extravagance I had nevertheless made something not far short of what the future may hold.¹¹¹

Thirteen books built up Fu Manchu's image on *both* sides of the Atlantic; published in three phases from 1913-1917, 1929-1941 and 1948-1959. Further film adaptations further reinforced the impact of Rohmer's Yellow Peril imagery.¹¹² The political sensitivity of the material was shown by Chinese diplomats in Washington unsuccessfully attempting to delay MGM's 1932 film adaptation *Mask of Fu Manchu*, on the grounds that would damage China's image.¹¹³ The impact, the resonance, of Fu Manchu was impressive; a "sway over the public imagination"

¹⁰⁶ Rudyard Kipling, *From Sea to Sea*, 1.245. Also Kipling's "watch the yellow faces that glare at you ... and you will be afraid, as I was afraid", 1.305–6.

¹⁰⁷ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 56.

¹⁰⁸ Idem, *Fu Manchu's Bride*, 78.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Christensen, "The Political Appeal of Dr. Fu Manchu," 81–89; Tina Chen, "Dissecting the 'Devil Doctor': Stereotypes and Sensationalism in Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu," 35–59.

¹¹⁰ Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and the Chinese Puzzle in Imperial Britain*, 75–80 for discussion of early Fu Manchu novels.

¹¹¹ Sax Rohmer, "Meet Dr. Fu Manchu."

¹¹² Richard Oehling, "The Yellow Menace: Asian Images in American Films," 182–206. Also Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*; Nicke Browne, "Orientalism as an Ideological Form: American Film Theory in the Silent Period," 23–31.

¹¹³ Ash and Rohmer, *Master of Villainy*, 214–15.

for half a century, as a “dominant and long-lived iconic figure in the EuroAmerican imaginary about Asia”.¹¹⁴

Fu Manchu may have been described as “exotic” and as “a breath of the East-that stretched out a yellow hand to the West” but this was no hand of friendship.¹¹⁵ The first introduction of Fu Manchu by Rohmer to his readers in 1913 had been stark and iconic, with threatening imagery firmly established for posterity:

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government - which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.¹¹⁶

Uncertainty *and* threat were entwined in Fu Manchu's “devilish, inscrutable ways”.¹¹⁷ Mystery and inscrutability overlapped with his deviousness and deception as the “insidious enemy”.¹¹⁸ Conceptually, Fu Manchu seems to indeed represent “a demonized Oriental Other”; with Fu Manchu having “a personality scarcely human” as the “devil doctor”.¹¹⁹ Cultural challenges were also present for Rohmer; “it seemed that a great yellow hand was stretched out over London. Doctor Fu-Manchu was a menace to the civilized world”.¹²⁰ Political challenges were also present, “Fu Manchu's threat as a counter-imperial force”.¹²¹ Rohmer's *Re-Enter Fu Manchu* (1957) had Fu Manchu still proclaiming “one of his favourite slogans ... ‘The dusk of the West has fallen. The dawn of the East has come’”.¹²²

If we stand back, there seems clear “race paranoia ... in the Fu Manchu novels”, with “an irrefragable racial anxiety” concerning the Chinese.¹²³ In part, this reflected the unease that afflicted much internal debate in Britain at the start of the twentieth century, the sense in 1911 of the Chinese in Britain “as a growing national

¹¹⁴ Tina Chen, “Dissecting the ‘Devil Doctor’,” 36; James Hevia, “Specters from the East,” 319.

¹¹⁵ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 112.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112. US publication as *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*.

¹¹⁹ Karen Kingsbury, “Yellow Peril, Dark Hero,” 116; Sax Rohmer, *The Shadow of Fu Manchu*, 46 and *The Devil Doctor* (1916).

¹²⁰ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 194.

¹²¹ Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and the Chinese Puzzle in Imperial Britain*, 80.

¹²² Sax Rohmer, *Re-enter Dr Fu Manchu*, 182.

¹²³ Urmila Seshagiri, “Modernity's (Yellow) Perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English Race Paranoia,” 163.

problem”.¹²⁴ Racial solidarity affected the international system. Rohmer may have warned that “the victory of Fu-Manchu, might mean the turning of the balance which a wise providence had adjusted between the white and yellow races”, but this was a balance based on Western (white) power.¹²⁵ Right from the onset, Fu Manchu’s threat was presented in stark racial terms. He was “the enemy of the white race”; he represented a potential “victory of the yellow races over the white” and “the swamping of the White world by Yellow hordes”.¹²⁶ Two decades later, he remained “the powerful and evil man who sought to destroy white civilization”.¹²⁷ Conversely, Fu Manchu’s opponent Nayland Smith worked “not in the interests of the British Government merely, but in the interests of the entire white race”.¹²⁸ As such, it was “Nayland Smith, the barrier between the White races and the devouring tide of the Yellow”, typical use of wider emotive imagery of the Chinese masses.¹²⁹

The first Fu Manchu stories, which emerged in magazine instalments during 1912, came at the moment when the old decaying China of the Qing regime had collapsed, and when Sun Yat-sen’s Republic of China was trying to construct a new dynamic China. Commentators in London speculated on these changes and what would come from “an awakened, and what promises to be a vigorous, Republic”.¹³⁰ There is a sense that “Fu-Manchu and his hordes ... emblemize not only dynastic China’s ideological opposition to the modern Christian West but also the emergent geopolitical ambitions of a post-1911 China determined to fashion itself as a nation unhindered by the imperial designs of Britain, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Russia, or Japan”.¹³¹ As George Lanning had put it in 1912, “it must not be supposed that China will for ever bear with patience the pinpricks of the West, much less its bludgeon blows. She is now awake to them all. She sleeps no longer. Her peaceful sons are arming for the fray”.¹³² China’s longer term potential set the scene for Rohmer’s first trilogy of Fu Manchu books in 1913–17. Jesse Steiner argued quite seriously in 1917 that “it is now plainly evident that the Chinese millions are abandoning their complacent, self-sufficient attitude and are gathering their strength in a more determined and effective manner than has ever

¹²⁴ Herman Sceauffaur, “The Chinese in England: A Growing National Problem.”

¹²⁵ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 194.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161, 163; Sax Rohmer, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 117.

¹²⁷ *Idem*, *Fu Manchu’s Bride*, 213.

¹²⁸ *Idem*, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 5. Also Clive Bloom, “West is East: Nayland Smith’s Sinophobia and Sax Rohmer’s Bank Balance,” 178–91.

¹²⁹ Sax Rohmer, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 151.

¹³⁰ George Lanning, *Old Forces in New China*, v. Also J. Scheltema, “New China Asserting Herself,” 397–403.

¹³¹ Urmila Seshagiri, “Modernity’s (Yellow) Perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English Race Paranoia,” 170.

¹³² George Lanning, *Old Forces in New China*, 2.

characterized them in the past.”¹³³ Rohmer was well aware of these new forces, though typically extending them still further; as his talk of “Yen-Sun-Yat” (Sun Yat-sen) and the “Young China Movement” (i.e. Sun’s Guomintang nationalists) gave way to a “Third Force”, to the “Si-Fan”, and then Fu Manchu. Rohmer’s sense in 1922 remained troubled, “China is in the throes of a new disruption? China is now an integral part in international politics ... the Chinese still believe that the yellow race can dominate the world”.¹³⁴

Admittedly, China subsequently slid into warlord fragmentation in the 1920s; though a degree of national reunification was achieved following Chiang Kai-shek’s Northern Expedition in 1928. In the early 1930s, ongoing civil war between the Guomintang and Communist groups, and Japanese expansionism (Rohmer’s “the ape-like war lords of Japan”) disrupted China’s progress; for Rohmer, the “muddle which had taken the place of the once great Chinese Empire”.¹³⁵ Fu Manchu’s goals were China-centred; “he aimed to lift China from the mire into which China had fallen. He was, according to his own peculiar lights, a great patriot”.¹³⁶ Rohmer argued in 1935 that, at some point, “China, then, will come into her own. The dusk of the West will have fallen: the dawn of the East will have come”.¹³⁷ Rohmer’s sense in 1938 remained troubled:

One wonders if a Kubla Khan is about to arise: one who by force of personality will weave together the million threads and from his loom produce a close-knit China. Should this occur, what then? The Pacific slopes of America would be deeply interested. And Australia would follow the policy of such a Yellow Emperor with keen attention.¹³⁸

In retrospect, the obvious context for this future was the rise of Mao Zedong’s Communist Party and its long march towards power, graphically portrayed in Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China* (1937). Rohmer had Fu Manchu still looking forward in 1941 to long-term revival; “my power rests in the East ... I shall restore the lost grandeur of China ... the dusk of the West will have fallen, the golden dawn of the east will come”.¹³⁹

The third group of Fu Manchu stories were set in the Cold War. Fu Manchu was portrayed with his own longer-term anti-Communist plans for China’s revival. In *The Shadow of Fu Manchu* (1948/49), Fu Manchu argued that “my mission is to

¹³³ Jesse Steiner, *The Japanese Invasion. A Study in the Psychology of Inter-Racial Contacts*, 196.

¹³⁴ Sax Rohmer, “The Black Mandarin” (1922), rep. in *Tales of East and West*, 22.

¹³⁵ Idem, *Sins of Sumeru*, 80; idem, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 110.

¹³⁶ Idem, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 247.

¹³⁷ Idem, “Meet Dr. Fu Manchu.”

¹³⁸ Idem, “The Birth of Fu Manchu.”

¹³⁹ Idem, *The Island of Fu Manchu*, 32. Virtually identical words as had been deployed in 1935.

save the world from the leprosy of Communism”; and in *The Wrath of Fu Manchu* (1952) to “drive Communism out of the East”.¹⁴⁰ A decade later, in *Re-Enter Fu Manchu* (1957), Fu Manchu’s sights were fixed on regime change in the People’s Republic of China; “lull the [Communist] enemy into a state of false security. Wait! Wait for my word! Then – but not until then-strike, all my millions together. And at last China, our China, will lay a choice pearl in my hand”.¹⁴¹ In *Emperor Fu Manchu* (1959), Fu Manchu’s comments were trenchant to Nayland Smith on “the offal who pose as lords of China? Can you conceivably believe, knowing the history of my people, that these unclean people can retain their hold upon China, my China? ... I am a patriot”.¹⁴² By this time, the “ideological” (Communist Red Peril) threat posed by any Soviet-Chinese axis was more stressed by Rohmer than the “racial” (Chinese Yellow Peril) lines of his earlier novels.

Images of Oriental Women

Rohmer’s images of women continued this theme of Oriental mystery; “I am still enslaved by the mystery of Egypt’s veiled women. The real Egyptian woman when she bears her pitcher upon her head and glides, stately, sinuously, through the dusk to the well, is a figure to enchain the imagination”.¹⁴³ For one of Rohmer’s Western protagonists, Egypt was the land of “sinuous Egyptians, whose long eyes were wells of feminine secrets ... mystery was what he sought, but never found, among the [white/Western] women of his acquaintance”.¹⁴⁴ There was surrounding Zara el-Khala, typically for Rohmer’s portrayal of the Orient, “a deeper and darker mystery” encountered as Rohmer’s character was “looking hungrily into those Eastern eyes”.¹⁴⁵ Mystery though went with a degree of dismissal, the “naiveté of the Oriental woman”.¹⁴⁶ There was certainly though the allure of a swathe of Oriental woman; “fantasies of the exotic Orient” typified in Rohmer’s portrayals of Fah Lo Suee, Suzee Chee Ho, Naida, Pool-‘o-the-Moon (Yasmine), Shejeret ed-Durr, Zarmi, Zara el-Khala (‘Flower of the Desert’), and Karamaneh.¹⁴⁷

In the case of Rohmer’s women from the Far East there was pervasive sensuality; “I belong to China’, she murmured, and in China women are treated as women”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁰ Idem, *The Shadow of Fu Manchu*, 107; Idem, “The Wrath of Fu Manchu,” rep. in *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 5, 49.

¹⁴¹ Idem, *Re-enter Fu Manchu*, 81.

¹⁴² Idem, *Emperor Fu Manchu*, 182. US publication 1959.

¹⁴³ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 182.

¹⁴⁴ Idem, *She Who Sleeps*, 6.

¹⁴⁵ Idem, *The Golden Scorpion*, 30–31.

¹⁴⁶ Idem, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 62.

¹⁴⁷ Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique. Dragon Ladies, Gesiha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*. See also Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*.

¹⁴⁸ Sax Rohmer, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 101.

The speaker, Fah Lo Suee the daughter of Fu Manchu, was first described as having “a face Orientally dark ... with a graceful languor suggestive of the East rather than of the West”.¹⁴⁹ Later on, she was described as possessing “exotic elegance”, in which “her movements were feline in their indolent grace”.¹⁵⁰ This was a recurring theme. She had “a delicate indolence of carriage, wholly Oriental”; her “exotic indolence conjured up images of vanished empires ... this Eurasian witch. Every line and curve of her body, her voice, the perfume of her personality, intoxicated him”.¹⁵¹ She was a bewitching figure; “her smooth body was but a miraculous gesture of some Eastern craftsman ... her emerald robe I knew for an effect of cunning light, her movements for a mirage ... and slender insidious hands, scented lotus blossoms, touched me caressingly”.¹⁵² To the end, she remained “beautifully dangerous”; with Rohmer's Western protagonist “amazed, as always, vaguely disturbed, by her beauty ... an appeal seductively feminine ... a smile, at once voluptuous and mocking”.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, Suzee Chee Ho personified other strands of the Eastern image, “sphinx-like ... her mental repose, her passive acceptance of happenings calculated to reduce the average European woman to hysterics”.¹⁵⁴ Her depiction was enigmatically Oriental, “the fascinating shrug and that slow Eastern smile”.¹⁵⁵ Lala Huang had “the inviting smile which is the heritage of Eastern women” with a “caressing glance from beneath half-lowered lashes”.¹⁵⁶ She was “insidious and therefore dangerous”.¹⁵⁷ Consequently we find the description that “Lala was Oriental, and now, alone in the night, distrust leapt into being within him [the White protagonist John Durham] ... She was perhaps a vampire of the most dangerous sort, one who lured men to strange deaths for some sinister object beyond reach of a Western imagination”.¹⁵⁸

In the case of Rohmer's women from the Middle East, similar “Oriental” images were present. Naida “was dark, with the darkness of the East, but beautiful with a beauty that was tragic. Her eyes were glorious wells of sadness, seeming to mirror a soul that had known a hundred ages. Withal she had the figure of a girl, slender and supple, possessing the poetic grace and poetry of movement born only in the Orient”.¹⁵⁹ As for Pool-‘o-the-Moon (Yasmine); “at heart she remained Oriental. She loved to deck herself in rich robes, with sashes cunningly contrived and intertwined,

¹⁴⁹ Idem, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 151.

¹⁵⁰ Idem, *Fu Manchu's Bride*, 54, 55.

¹⁵¹ Idem, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 99; idem, *The Trail of Fu Manchu*, 101.

¹⁵² Idem, *Daughter of Fu Manchu*, 144–45.

¹⁵³ Idem, ‘The Wrath of Fu Manchu’, 56, 53.

¹⁵⁴ Idem, *Yellow Shadows*, 243.

¹⁵⁵ Idem, *Yellow Shadows*, 248.

¹⁵⁶ Idem, *Tales of Chinatown*, 15.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Chinatown*, 31.

¹⁵⁹ Idem, *Fire Tongue*, 155.

and with jewels on her slim arms and fingers to posture before a mirror".¹⁶⁰ She remained a "mysterious" figure with "secret dreams".¹⁶¹

With Shejeret ed-Durr, Oriental sensuality gave way to more overt Oriental sexuality; her "body in that indescribable manner which, like the stirring of palm fronds, speaks the veritable language of the voluptuous Orient ... swift passion informed the languorous body, which magically became transformed into that of a leaping nymph, a bacchante".¹⁶² Zarmi was also portrayed in overtly sexual fashion; "her lips parted in the slow voluptuous smile of the Orient ... her voice possessed a faint husky note which betrayed her Eastern parentage, yet it had in it the siren lure which is the ancient heritage of the Eastern woman".¹⁶³ In turn, Zara el-Khala ('Flower of the Desert') had "the suave grace, too, which belongs to the women of the East, so that many admiring glances followed her charming figure as she crossed the room".¹⁶⁴ Yet ultimately there was "a repressed savagery that spoke of the Oriental blood in her".¹⁶⁵

One image prop frequently deployed by Rohmer was perfume and its mysterious captivating, entrapping other-worldliness. Perfume surrounded Fah Lo Suee's otherness; "perfume of which I became aware, were responsible, I found myself thinking of a flower-bedecked shrine, wherefrom arose the smoke of incense to some pagan god".¹⁶⁶ Exotic perfumery surrounded Naida; "she wore a robe that was distinctly Oriental ... She conjured up dreams of the perfumed luxury of the East, and was a figure to fire the imagination".¹⁶⁷ Elsewhere was "a perfume which seemed to contain the very soul of Eastern mystery. Only one woman known to me used that perfume—Karamaneh!"¹⁶⁸ Perfume was also glamour with her; "the glamour of the Orient was in that subtle essence".¹⁶⁹ Perfume was also intoxication with Karamaneh; "I detected the exquisite, elusive perfume which, like a breath of musk, spoke of the Orient; and, as always, it played havoc with my reason, seeming to intoxicate me as though it were the very essence of her loveliness".¹⁷⁰

Karamaneh was Rohmer's earliest main female figure; someone who "functions as the objectified image of the colonial other".¹⁷¹ Her description in the first Fu Manchu story involved classic ambiguities. On the one hand; "hers was a nature incomprehensible to me in some respects. The soul of Karamaneh was a closed

¹⁶⁰ Idem, *Egyptian Nights*, 42.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶² Sax Rohmer, *Tales of Secret Egypt*, 146–47.

¹⁶³ Idem, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 38–39.

¹⁶⁴ Idem, *The Golden Scorpion*, 156.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹⁶⁶ Sax Rohmer, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 152.

¹⁶⁷ Idem, *Fire Tongue*, 155.

¹⁶⁸ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 192–93.

¹⁶⁹ Idem, *The Return of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 49.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹⁷¹ Rebecca Wingfield, "Gazing on Fu-Manchu," 88.

book to my short-sighted Western eyes”, typical mystery in play.¹⁷² On the other hand; “the body of Karamaneh was exquisite; her beauty of a kind that was a key to the most extravagant rhapsodies of Eastern poets. Her eyes held a challenge wholly Oriental in its appeal; her lips, even in repose, were a taunt”.¹⁷³ Basic divides were present, for “she was an Oriental and her code must necessarily be different from mine”.¹⁷⁴ She evoked the old images of the East; “Karamaneh, the beautiful slave ... with the opulence of old Arabia; who had seemed a fitting figure for the romances of Bagdad during the Caliphate—Karamaneh ... whose inscrutable Eastern soul I had presumed, fatuously, to have laid bare and analysed”.¹⁷⁵ She was someone “who might have stepped out of the pages of ‘The Arabian nights’”.¹⁷⁶ She was also a modern temptation; “I never had seen a face so seductively lovely”.¹⁷⁷ Such temptation blurred moral boundary lines; “the wonderful eyes of this modern Delilah ... her charm enveloped me like a magic cloud ... her beauty was wholly intoxicating ... her seductive beauty argued against my sense of right”.¹⁷⁸

Karamaneh not only involved an initial Eastern control of her, by Fu Manchu, but also subsequent control of her by the West. Thus, Doctor Petrie was told:

You don't know the Oriental mind as I do ... if you would only seize her [Karamaneh] by the hair, drag her down to some cellar, hurl her down and stand over her with a whip, she would tell you everything she knows, and salve her strange Eastern conscience with the reflection that speech was forced from her ... and she would adore you for your savagery, deeming you forceful and strong.¹⁷⁹

The most curious thing was Karamaneh's fate. She was told to “conquer . . . the barbaric impulses that sometimes flamed up with her”.¹⁸⁰ Consequently, she married one of the main protagonists, Petrie, and retired to Cairo, living the life of a colonial wife. Increasingly passive; when she reappeared in the 1931 novel, she was mentioned as “Kara” and then just “Mrs Petrie”, but no longer profiled in her own right.¹⁸¹ She had been marginalised and absorbed; “from her [Westernised]

¹⁷² Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 282.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Sax Rohmer, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 42.

¹⁷⁵ Idem, *The Return of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 74.

¹⁷⁶ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 144.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 40, 42.

¹⁷⁹ Sax Rohmer, *The Return of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 125. Note comment by David Shih, “The Color of Fu-Manchu: Orientalist Method in the Novels of Sax Rohmer,” 310, that “the Orient, as the eroticized counterpart to the West, is to be understood, dominated, and domesticated, a process that would necessitate a degree of feminization. We can see this Orientalist attitude in Nayland Smith.”

¹⁸⁰ Sax Rohmer, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 200.

¹⁸¹ Idem, *Daughter of Fu Manchu*, 11 for “Kara”, and 10, 216 for “Mrs Petrie”. Similar pattern in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 82, which takes place in Cairo. Her appearance there came at the

appearance I should never have suspected Eastern blood”.¹⁸² In the end, Karamaneh proved to be a fairly archetypal Eurasian woman in male thrillers set in Britain’s Oriental empire; in which Arabs were seen as closer, more familiar, and ultimately less Oriental than China and the Chinese. As such, “Karamaneh’s incorporation into British colonial society exemplifies an attack on imperial structures of representation that has been (predictably) overcome”.¹⁸³

Said’s Orientalism?

Here we can come back to Irwin’s call that “Said’s over-interpretation of selected works from the canon of high literature has gone nowhere in particular. *Orientalism* has misdirected our attention. Orientalism in a pejorative sense comes bubbling up from below — pulp novels” and suchlike.¹⁸⁴ The question of interaction between populist vehicles-sentiments and elite political attitudes-policies remains a complex area; though interaction and transmission in democracies remains qualitatively present, even if not readily quantifiable. Rohmer both *reflected* but also *affected* wider attitudes. Consequently, Irwin felt that “it is a very foolish piece of academic snobbery to go hunting for faint hints of Orientalism in the pages of George Eliot or Joseph Conrad, while neglecting the novels of Sax Rohmer”.¹⁸⁵ This neglect is what this article has tried to redress, through presenting Rohmer’s themes on the Orient. This leaves the question of how far Rohmer’s material reflected the Orientalism framework later proposed by Edward Said?

Said’s description of Orientalism was that “it designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally. One could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism”.¹⁸⁶ Rohmer’s Oriental figures were frequently despotic strong personalities, with rich atmospheric intensity. In depicting Oriental characters and their evil mysterious schemes, Rohmer also exemplified Orientalism’s “imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient’”.¹⁸⁷

Said’s basic thrust was on the images, the “binary typology” that he saw as pervading Orientalist narratives and discourses.¹⁸⁸ Did Rohmer reflect these West-East binary oppositions like advanced-backward, progressive-regressive, adult-

very end of the book, marginalised at a wedding reception in Britain; “one fleeting glimpse I had of Petrie’s beautiful wife. She waved to me from a distant corner and then disappeared before I could reach her,” 310.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁸³ Tina Chen, “Dissecting the ‘Devil Doctor’,” 44.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Irwin, “Popular Culture, Orientalism, and Edward Said,” 9.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 31–32.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

childish, active-passive, superior-inferior, good-bad, moral-immoral, etc.? In the main, yes, as with his repeated depictions of drug-saturated dubious settings in Middle Eastern and Chinese circles which were set against Western values, and with his depictions of childishness of the Orient and backwardness of Islam, although Rohmer's sense of Fu Manchu's scientific genius does not fit into an Orientalist stereotype of a backward Orient.

Did Rohmer have a Saidean sense of the Orient being “lamentably alien”, the Orient as “the Other”?¹⁸⁹ Yes he did, especially in his Chinese characters. This sense of alienness was tied to a sense of potential threat, even whilst the West projected actual hegemonic power. Did Rohmer reflect Said's sense of how “this ‘militant’ *Orient* came to stand for what Henri Baudet has called ‘the Asiatic tidal wave’”?¹⁹⁰ Yes, Rohmer did; with his talk of general massed Asian awakenings. Did Rohmer reflect Said's sense in *Orientalism*, where “[Orientalist] dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something ... to be feared (the Yellow Peril)”, though Said left such Yellow Peril images unexplored.¹⁹¹ The answer is most certainly yes; as with Rohmer's Fu Manchu character, with Rohmer's wider comments about China and the Chinese, and with his repeated usage of the phrase “Yellow Peril”.

Such imagery raises the question of wider racial themes. Here, Said argued that “what matters in Orientalism is the general group of ideas overriding the mass of material—about which who could deny that they were shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like”.¹⁹² Such materials were what Rana Kabbani dealt with elsewhere as the “text as pretext” in play with the “imperial fictions” fabricating Western “myths of the Orient”.¹⁹³ Rohmer's pre-1948 novels were quite specific on maintaining British imperialism in Asia; within the West “ultimately, the texts functioned as justification for British and U.S. discrimination against the Chinese”; though anti-communism came to shape the post-1948 materials.¹⁹⁴ Said's definition of “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” matches Rohmer lines like “the West must control the East—or perish”.¹⁹⁵ It also matches Rohmer's post-colonial sense, in 1955, on “the quick change that's come over the eastern world since Western control was cast off. In ten years these people have gone back two centuries”.¹⁹⁶ In terms of racism, Rohmer was more overt, like Kipling, with regard to China and the Chinese; whereas the Arabs attracted less racial bile from his pen.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 207, 24.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹³ Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions. Europe's Myths of Orient*. She does not though deal with pulp/populist fiction.

¹⁹⁴ Tina Chen, “Dissecting the ‘Devil Doctor’,” 57.

¹⁹⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 3; Sax Rohmer, *Sins of Sumeru*, 79.

¹⁹⁶ Sax Rohmer, *Sand and Satin*, 146.

In religious terms, did Rohmer reflect Said's sense that "Orientalism carries within it the stamp of a problematic European attitude towards Islam"?¹⁹⁷ Rohmer did not deal with Islam that much; though his depiction of hashishin drug cults deriving from Ismaeli Islam, and his depiction of Muslim revivalists, painted an uncomfortable position for the reader. One positive religious feature in Rohmer that does not particularly fit into a Saidean framework is Rohmer's overlooked story *Orchard of Tears* (1921). A vision of East-West reconciliation came there, in its hero Paul Mario's claim that "the systems of Hermes, Krishna, Confucius, Moses, Orpheus and Christ were based upon a common primeval truth"; with Mario also reaching out to the esoteric "truth underlying the symbols, Isis, Osiris and Amen-Ra", "the secrets of Japanese mysticism", and the "philosophy of Buddha".¹⁹⁸ The absence of Islam from this spectrum of religious convergence is perhaps significant?

Rohmer's blurring of racial divides through the alluring figures of Eurasian women, a frequently employed motif in his novels, seems to cut across Orientalism; in Rohmer's own words concerning Karamaneh and Petrie; "herein, East is West and West is East".¹⁹⁹ However, such interracial allure actually reinforced an Orientalist sense of the exotic and erotic role of the Oriental female, in an ultimately subordinatory role to the Western male. Rohmer reflected a Saidean situation in which "Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province ... it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy"²⁰⁰ Hence Rohmer's harem visions, in Said's terms "Oriental fantasies".²⁰¹ Rohmer's usages relate back to what Said saw as "an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex ... the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire".²⁰²

In various books Rohmer referred to "Orientalist" scholars and travellers in the sense of expertise. However, the interesting thing is that Rohmer also talked about "Orientalism", in a values way that resonated with Said's later portrayal of the term. For Rohmer, describing Ormuz Khan's dwellings:

¹⁹⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 74.

¹⁹⁸ Sax Rohmer, *The Orchard of Tears*, 175, 217, 181. Rohmer differentiated philosophical Buddhism from Tibetan Buddhism, and its "unholy arts of the Lamas of Rache-Churan," *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, 146.

¹⁹⁹ Idem, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, 282.

²⁰⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 207.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 188. Also Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions*, "the eroticism that the East promised was mysterious ... an imaginary harem when entering the metaphor of the Orient ... an Orient that shimmered with possibilities, that promised a sexual space ... the seraglio of the imagination ... the impossible other," 112–21.

Its keynote was orientalism, not of that sensuous yet grossly masculine character which surrounds the wealthy Eastern esthete but quite markedly feminine ... He wore a rich, brocaded robe, trimmed with marten, fur ... His lips were full and very red. As a woman he might have been considered handsome—even beautiful; in a man this beauty was unnatural and repellent. He wore Oriental slippers, fur-lined, and his feet rested on a small ottoman ... the languid, handsome Oriental.²⁰³

This was transgression of the natural bounds, Western masculinity juxtaposed with Eastern femininity, and an undertone of doubtful sexuality and languid inertia. This fitted Said's later Orientalism framework quite well.

Postscript

Rohmer's strikingly racially-charged imagery of the earlier novels had diminished in the later 1930s. The 1950s materials were relatively tame; one might say defanged in many ways, in terms of less blatant racial negativities towards China and the Chinese. By the 1950s, the old-style overt imperial racism seen in the 1913–17 Fu Manchu materials may have seemed a bit out of date for Rohmer; based as he then was in an America trying to win a Cold War in Asia on grounds that were not just the old-style imperialism represented in the late-Edwardian British Empire decade that the Fu Manchu material had first arisen.

Nevertheless, "Cold War Orientalism" maintained a China-threat image in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁰⁴ Fu Manchu's menacing image remained potent; helped by continuing book re-publications, film adaptations and television series in the 1960s and afterwards. Consequently, "the yellow peril ... has been ingrained in the popular imagination ... in the mass media", with Fu Manchu "a figure who still haunts the political imagination of white America".²⁰⁵ A modern yellow Peril was also discernible in the "China Threat" images of the 1990s. James Lilley warned in 1997 about "the 'Fu Manchu' problem of "provocative" language "reviving old fears about the 'Yellow peril'".²⁰⁶ Within China, "Yellow Peril fallacies" in international relations have been specifically linked to Sax Rohmer's creation Fu Manchu; as "a typical image in which the West smears the Chinese ... the image reflects the West cultural hegemony and oriental discourse towards the Chinese".²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Sax Rohmer, *Fire Tongue*, 102–3.

²⁰⁴ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination 1945–1961*.

²⁰⁵ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, 3; Karen Kingsbury, "Yellow Peril, Dark Hero," 105.

²⁰⁶ James Lilley, "The 'Fu Manchu' Problem," *Newsweek*, 24 February 1997. Also Doobo Shin, "From Yellow Peril through Model Minority to Renewed Yellow Peril," 385–409; Franklin Ng, "Chinese Americans: Still the Yellow Peril?" 186–89.

²⁰⁷ Chinese language discussions by Xu-hong Fang, "A Discussion of 'Yellow Peril' Fallacy in the Realm of International Relations," 54–57; Yan Liu, "Fu Manchu: A Typical Image

Post 9/11, Fu Manchu can be seen as the “monster within” as well as monster without figure, still able to point to unease within the West over the East.²⁰⁸ As Witchard noted in 2009; “that Rohmer’s unequivocally racist *Fu Manchu* series is still in print owes something no doubt to the sinophobia that remains close to the surface of the Western psyche”.²⁰⁹

A final twist is that though Rohmer died over half a century ago, “Dr. Fu Manchu is one of those rare literary inventions ... whose connection with its origin has dissolved to the point that it has attained a life of its own within the popular imagination, becoming a text able to generate its own logic and meaning independent of its creator”.²¹⁰ We can return to the earlier comments made by Rohmer about Harte, but now substitute Rohmer for Harte; namely that “thoughts are things, and the things created by Max Rohmer still walks among us, although the words [Rohmer’s novels] which gave it birth are forgotten”.

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in Which the West Smears the Chinese,” 51–53; Also Gui-lu Ge, “Yellow Peril and Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu,” 95–98.

²⁰⁸ Lily Ling, “The Monster Within: What Fu Manchu and Hannibal Lecter Can Tell Us about Terror and Desire in a Post-9/11 World,” 377–400.

²⁰⁹ Anne Witchard, *Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie*, 1.

²¹⁰ David Shih, “The Color of Fu-Manchu,” 305.

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