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T H E

S I N O L O G I S T S

# EXPLORING CHINA

AN ENGLISHMAN'S  
CULTURAL ADVENTURE

ROBIN GILBANK



中国出版集团  
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T H E  
SINOLOGISTS



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However,

I must not forget that in these matters I am one of the ignorant. How much we owe to Mr. Hsiung's talent, and Mr. Hsiung's English, I do not know...

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Whatever it may be in the Chinese, Mr. Hsiung's English version of *Lady Precious Stream* can be read so easily as romance. But we must do our part; and as a mere preliminary, in order to take what Mr. Hsiung has to give, we must allow him to pretend that we are in a theatre, the neglect of everything we call illusion (really, no doubt, these represent a deep and strict artistic convention — but that is nothing to us as readers), the mingling of naïve simplicity and stately ceremony, instantly captivate our imaginations; and we accept without question the reason why the Prime Minister wears a long black beard: it “indicates that he is not the villain of the piece”. But all this, as I say, is mere preliminary. The real force of Mr. Hsiung's Chinese

magic does not lie in the delightful technique of his (for us) imaginary theatre: it is in the lives—the minds, the manners, the speech—of the people he shows us there: enchanted people who confer their enchantment on us. The moment when the spell is clinched comes, I think, when the Prime Minister Wang says “Today is New Year’s Day. I want to celebrate it in some way. It looks as if it is going to snow. I propose that we have a feast here in the garden to enjoy the snow.” To enjoy the snow! There is the essence of the spell Mr. Hsiung casts on our occidental minds; these charming people of his have a secret, which we have not: it is the secret of how to live. And that, while we are in this romance of their lives and fortunes, is what they confer on us. It is not a fantastic unreality, this world in which Prime Ministers celebrate New Year’s Day by feasting in the garden to enjoy the snow. That would not happen in Downing Street; nevertheless, this world of Mr. Hsiung’s, this world in which ‘Precious Stream’ is a young lady’s name, is a delicate and decorous reality; and a profoundly human reality. Witness the ever-present humour of it.

As with the large majority of its readers, with me *Lady Precious Stream* can be nothing but a piece of literature written (and wonderfully well written) in English. What it may be in Chinese we have no notion; but surely a piece of literature

there too? Nothing of the sort. Mr. Hsiung professes to be nothing more than a translator; and as such he has produced this exquisite thing. And yet he assures me that no cultivated Chinese would regard the original as worthy in the name of literature at all. *Lady Precious Stream* represents the purely popular tradition of dramatic art in China. Mr. Hsiung candidly tells me, to the commercial theatre. Indeed, it is not properly a translation of a play; it renders Mr. Hsiung's conflation of several versions of a famous dramatic theme, pretty old and of contentious descent, of which each company that performs it has its own variant: very much as the stories of Dr. Faustus or Mr. Punch have varied accordingly as they have been the property of one puppet-show or another. Now this seems to me very remarkable. We are reminded of the Japanese colour-prints: a plebeian amusement in their native home, an art of delicious refinement when transported to Europe. But China is infinitely the superior of Japan in aesthetic culture; and aesthetic culture is the measure of civilization. Nothing, I think, could better indicate the nature of Chinese civilization than the literary status which *Lady Precious Stream*, a piece of popular, commercial drama in China, at once assumes when translated into English.

However, I must not forget that in these matters I am one

of the ignorant. How much we owe to Mr. Hsiung's talent, and Mr. Hsiung's English, I do not know.

LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

BEDFORD COLLEGE

March 1934

The English poet and critic Lascelles Abercrombie (1881-1938) was — as he would have been the first to admit — not the most obviously qualified critic to evaluate a translation of a traditional Chinese drama. On the other hand, his opinions were widely sought-after, and he had come to be recognised as something of a barometer for discerning which new trends in English literature were likely to last and which would prove mere fads. For instance, Abercrombie had been one of the most sensitive advocates for *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence. His review for the *Manchester Guardian* observed that in his complex and multifaceted construction of character, the Modernist novelist left a blazing trail for others who would follow. In praising *Lady Precious Stream* (*Wang Bao Chuan*) he was engaging with a much rarer customer, a popular text which although almost universally known in its homeland seemed utterly alien in both form and content to foreign literature lovers.

The importation of *Lady Precious Stream* to the United Kingdom was the brainchild of the Nanchang-born writer and translator S. I.

Hsiung (the preferred anglicized name of Xiong Shiyi) (1902-91). Rather unusually for a play in this period, the script of the drama was published first in printed book form before it made its way to the stage. The Methuen edition, with Abercrombie's effusive foreword, priced modestly sold well. Having previously been rejected by eleven theatrical producers, the actress and impresario Nancy Price (1880-1970) now agreed to direct her own company, the People's National Theatre, in a production to be staged at the Little Theatre on John Street, London.

Confounding all expectations, *Lady Precious Stream* ran for 1,000 performances before the curtain went down for the last time in November 1936. During a domestic run lasting more than eighteen months it was viewed by members of the British Royal Family, including Queen Mary (the paternal grandmother of our present queen), who wore an extravagantly embroidered robe imported from China. Upon transferring to Broadway, the play received an ovation from the then First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Its translator found himself feted on both sides of the Atlantic. Upon their arrival in New York, Mr. Hsiung's spouse, Dymia Tsai, was praised by the media as his "lovely, almond-eyed poetess-wife."<sup>1</sup> Before long the couple's social circle had expanded to include figures as diverse as

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1 "Chinese Shakespeare comes to Broadway," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 2 November 1935.

George Bernard Shaw and the Hollywood actress Anna May Wong. Black-and-white photographs abound of the diminutive pair (he was under five feet tall and Dymia even shorter) among illustrious company.

I only very recently learned about Hsiung's singular, if ultimately short-lived, triumph. It seems to have been largely glossed over, or else treated as a mere byway, in the history of British theatre and, for that matter, Anglo-Chinese cultural relations. Reviewing the facts from eight decades on, the Hsiung adaptation of *Lady Precious Stream* stands out for being the first time that a Chinese play directed by a Chinese playwright was performed on the London stage. Even though the actors were Caucasian and made to act in "yellow face" make-up, this can lay claim to an authenticity not to be found in other cultural depictions of China. My concerns in this chapter are twofold. First of all, I want to try and ascertain what different ideas and preconceptions foreign theatergoers may have had in their heads, and whether watching *Lady Precious Stream* may have reinforced or dispelled these views. Secondly, I wish to build a case for Hsiung's novel *The Bridge of Heaven* as being a work of as much, if not greater, value for its exploration of traditional Chinese culture.

S. I. Hsiung is now little remembered in either his native China or Great Britain, where he made his home between the 1930s and

the 1950s. His writing represents an endearing attempt to suffuse Chinese customs and history with a form of humour which is readily acceptable to the British palate. At the age of 30, and in spite of his prodigious talents, Wuhan University refused to grant him a tenured teaching post on the grounds that he did not possess a degree from a foreign university. Hsiung responded by enrolling on a postgraduate course at University College London. He dropped out, however, when *Lady Precious Stream* garnered overnight fame. Displaying little hubris towards those who had previously doubted him, he was only too happy for Sir Barry Jackson<sup>1</sup> — one of the first people to reject the play — to take the production to the esteemed Malvern Festival, and for Leon Lion<sup>2</sup> to assume the role of Prime Minister Wang, which he had declined the first time around. Hsiung left England in the mid-1950s as a lecturer at Cambridge University.

In June 2013, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing reissued his English language novel, *The Bridge of Heaven* (first published in 1943), and in anticipation of the event, the *Global Times* felt it necessary to publish an article reacquainting Chinese readers with the neglected author. Shu Yi, the son of Lao She, stated

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- 1 Sir Barry Jackson (1879-1961) was amongst the most distinguished theatre directors of his generation and founded both the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in his home city and the Malvern Festival, which ran each summer between 1929 and 1939. The latter played a considerable role in sustaining the reputation of Jackson's friend George Bernard Shaw.
  - 2 Leon M. Lion (1879-1947) was a theatre and film actor, who despite being of Caucasian ethnicity, frequently played Oriental characters on the stage and screen.