

Letter From London

by Derek Turner

Peking-on-Thames

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Cross Shaftesbury Avenue going south toward Leicester Square, and you leave homosexual London for Peking-on-Thames. Decorative oriental-style iron gates, like in some 18th-century pleasure garden, mark the various entrances to the small area which is officially designated "Chinatown." Oriental shops, restaurants, hairdressers, travel agents, and apothecaries selling Chinese medicines are crammed along and spill over Chinatown's permeable borders, like a medieval city whose population has grown too large. It is as if the inhabitants are seeking *Lebensraum* in the expensive *purlieu* of "Theatreland." The old De Hems Coffee House—now a bar—right outside the northern gate, is like a customs post, and seems immediately threatened with absorption into a greater Chinatown.

In this little rectangle bordered by Shaftesbury Avenue, Charing Cross Road, Leicester Square, and Wardour Street, first developed by Nicholas Barbon (son of the infamous "Praise-God Barebones") as an aristocratic residential neighborhood, the London air is filled with the smell of Chinese food and the sound of Chinese talking and laughing. The street signs are bilingual. (Not so obviously, a large part of Westminster Lending Library beside the Garrick Theatre is devoted to Chinese-language books and periodicals.) Shops, greengrocers, and restaurants line the pedestrianized streets, and every window displays massive jars of exotic roots, internal organs, and other "medicines," posters and publications in Chinese characters, bright red chickens depending from hooks, and overly pale, quivering piles of dead crustaceans and invertebrates. A solitary live eel (£1.95/lb.) waves his rear end apathetically in a large yellow barrel, awaiting his impending doom.

Dotted in amongst the Chinese shops and restaurants are occasional British

survivals—Ladbroke's betting shop, the King's Head pub, with its quietly smiling faces and homely lamps painted disconcertingly onto the glass of the first floor windows, a shop selling secondhand pop records, tapes, and CDs, Council litter bins and occasional Westminster Borough notices pasted up on lampposts or on the windows of briefly untenanted premises. One could easily imagine oneself in Shanghai International Settlement or modern Hong Kong, a notion reinforced by the sight of Metropolitan policemen and women on patrol, and besuited, white, male office workers towering over gesticulating Chinamen and women, walking along Gerrard Street down toward Charing Cross station and trains home to Kent. Visitors from Japan or China photograph themselves excitedly in front of the Chinese sculptures and shop-fronts. Bewildered European and American tourists wander through, looking as though they had been expecting something else. Starlings pick at squashed things in the gutters, and fly off toward their winter roosts in Leicester Square when disturbed. Groups of provincial "lads" out for the night stumble drunkenly but good-humoredly in search of the strip bars of Soho, and shaven-headed homosexuals with rucksacks hurry through the throng to cross Shaftesbury Avenue in the opposite direction.

This part of the city does not seem to remember its past glories. The Turk's Head tavern in Gerrard Street, Chinatown's main thoroughfare, where Johnson, Reynolds, and the others started The Club, is now the Loon Moon Supermarket, and pictures of topless Chinese girls cut from the magazines on sale inside are pinned to a noticeboard outside the door. Former residents of Gerrard Street include John Dryden, Edmund Burke, James Boswell, James Gibbs the architect, and Charles Kemble the actor, and Chesterton and Belloc first met in 1900 at the old Mont Blanc restaurant.

But it is not all doom and gloom. In 1850, Friedrich Engels lodged around the corner, in Macclesfield Street, now also almost entirely Chinese. He, at least, has gone. Some of what is now Chinatown has undoubtedly improved in the last 100 years, particularly what is now Newport Court, formerly known as

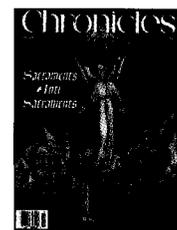
"Butchers' Row," described in 1872 as a "fountain of foul odors." The old Newport Market was described in an 1880's police report as "a veritable focus of every danger which can menace the health and social order of a city." The report's authors concluded that "it would be an act of true philanthropy to break up this reeking home of filthy vice." Even the recently documented presence of major criminal Tong activity in Chinatown does not permit modern Chinatown to qualify as a "reeking home of filthy vice."

It is very different from the old Chinese settlement in Limehouse in the East End, recorded so memorably in the works of Sax Rohmer and Thomas Burke, the latter himself an East Ender. Begun in the 1890's by sailors, colonization centered in what is now the remarkably characterless road called Pennyfields, just north of the tower at Canary Wharf. It probably only ever had a maximum of 2,500 inhabitants at any one time, but the perfervid Victorian imagination seized upon half-romantic, half-fearful notions of opium dens (opium smoking was only banned in 1916), gambling houses and illegal drinking shops populated by cruel, mustachioed, pigtailed, yellow men with masks for faces. The classic example of this popular image is Rohmer's Fu Manchu, who hatched many of his plots for world domination in secret bases beneath the

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Thames. In stark contrast, in Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*, Lien Chi Altangi, is portrayed as an urbane Western gentleman, albeit with a slightly flowery turn of phrase, and Burke's short story characters are at least as gentle and sensitive as other people, like Cheng Huan, the poet who attempts to rescue a Cockney girl from her brutal and drunken father in *The Chink and the Child*. (It may be of anthropological interest to note that the Cockney rhyming slang term for somebody Chinese is "Tiddley," as in "Tiddleywinks," whose second syllable, of course, rhymes with "Chinks.")

The caricature and the romance survived Victoria. Travel writer and journalist H.V. Morton, in his 1940 essay *Fan-Tan*, wrote: "The squalor of Limehouse is that strange squalor of the East which seems to conceal vicious splendour. . . . As you go on . . . past hunched figures who give way before you, it seems that, at any moment, you might stumble on the key to the mystery; that you might open a filthy door and find yourself in a palace sweet with joss-sticks, where queer things happen in a mist of smoke . . . such silence in den and in street; the uncanny silence of people who do not think as we think, whose ways are not our ways." The caricature became an affectionate one when George Formby described the industrious Chinese laundryman in his *Chinese Laundry Blues*: "Oh, Mr. Wu! / He's got a naughty eye that flickers / You should see him smiling when he's ironing ladies' [pause] blouses / Oh Mr. Wu! / What can I do? / I'm feeling kind of Limehouse Chinese laundry blues."

Even though we are all official residents of the "global village," and despite the unobtrusiveness of the Sino-Britons themselves, a sense of difference persists today. There is something wonderfully *outré* about this reverse colony in the center of one of the major Western cities.

Luckily, this sense of strangeness is not accompanied by vague resentment on the part of the indigenes. Sino-Britons seek nothing more than to get on with their lives. They are not interested in minority grievance politics. They are self-contained and largely self-supporting. They are not a drain on welfare. Chinese food is very popular, its down-market image notwithstanding. Most importantly, so far there are relatively few people of Chinese origin living in the

U.K. One can only hope that the probable—and probably large-scale—influx from Hong Kong due later this year into what is already an overcrowded island will not drown England's sense of wonderment in a sense of England drowning.

Derek Turner is the editor of Right Now!, published in London.

Foreign Correspondences

by William Mills

Bulgarian Autumn, Part I



Alexandr Nevsky Cathedral, Sophia.



Rather than dropping out of the sky into Bulgaria at the Sophia airport as I did, travelers would be better advised to enter by other ways. Driving up from Greece through the Rhodope mountains would be one appealing way. Another fascinating approach would be to sail into the Black Sea city of Varna or the town of Nesebăr. The beauty of Bulgaria would strike one straightaway. Either of these land or sea routes postpones the inevitable blow of the Marxist "architec-

ture" in the old Soviet Empire, a blow which has set back beauty by 100 years or so. The economies of Eastern Europe will have to improve dramatically before they can raze these buildings. The good news is that since many are very poorly built, they will not survive as long as the striking Roman amphitheater in Plovdiv, or the exquisite Backova monastery.

I was in Bulgaria partly because of the presidential elections. The office of the prime minister, which is the more powerful, was not up for a vote. This was just as well, for the present Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), after being in office for about a year and a half, is extremely unpopular. The government allowed grain to be exported last year, and since domestic grain prices are kept artificially low, grain producers sold to the world market. Now there is a real grain crisis; there are long lines at the bakeries, and in some towns bread is rationed. The Bulgarian monetary unit, the lev, has steadily lost value in relation to the dollar. This time last year, with BSP in control, the lev was 70 to the dollar; last July it was 188, and in December it was 560-600 to the dollar. Naturally this affects inflation and interest rates. Inflation is expected to be over 200 percent for the year, and interest rates are well over 100 percent! Bulgarian families on average spend a little more than half their income on food.

All of this is not just the result of the BSP in the last two years. As in so many ex-Soviet bloc countries, the politicians and bureaucrats in place at the time of the "changes" have generally resisted privatization. Insofar as some businesses are privatized, they are funneled to cronies of government officials, financed by spurious bank loans. (The Orion financial group is a good example, and its shenanigans have cast a long shadow over the current prime minister, Zhan Videnov.) Meanwhile the people are being robbed, and Swiss bank accounts continue to swell. To a great extent, therefore, the October election reflected this discontent.

The principal opponent of the BSP is the United Democratic Forces (UDF), an alliance of 15 parties and movements which include the Democratic Party, part of the Agrarian Party, part of the Christian Democrats, and also ethnic Turks. It must be said that while some of these coalition partners were in power from November 1991 to October 1992, they opposed mass privatization, too.