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The Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple: Exhibitions, Mass Culture and China in the British Imagination in the 1920s

Abstract

In February 1926 Chinese art collector John Hilditch opened the Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple in Manchester. Filling a garage with Chinese objects and performing what he claimed to be Buddhist rituals, Hilditch insisted the temple offered visitors chance to see Chinese art in ‘actual Chinese fashion and atmosphere’. This article analyses Hilditch’s attempts to construct an authentic temple and visitor accounts of its realism to analyse the relationship between high and low culture, and how China was understood and imagined in the 1920s. It shows how Hilditch’s combination of sensory effects adopted from mass culture and claims to museum notions of scientific verification, in addition to the projection of well-established stereotypes of China, skewed understandings of authenticity and invited faith – albeit most likely ‘ironic’ faith – in the temple’s legitimacy. Scholars have argued that the rise of mass culture prompted art museums to restructure on high cultural values but interpretation of the temple as a museum shows that the lines between mass culture and museums was blurred. The temple thereby encourages a broader definition of museums and complicates our understanding of interwar culture more generally by showing how the categories of high and low culture were less stable than some scholars have presumed.

Key words

1920s Britain, museums; Chinese art; mass culture; authenticity.

Introduction

Following the banging of gongs at around half past two on Saturday 13 February 1926, William Hulme Lever – Second Viscount Leverhulme and son of the industrialist self-made millionaire

– officially declared the Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple open. Constructed by Chinese art collector John Hilditch and his dance partner Dorothy McGill, the temple occupied what was formerly McGill’s garage at her house in Victoria Park, Manchester. After Lever’s speech Hilditch, garbed in Chinese robes (Figure 1), outlined that the ‘object and purpose of this Temple is to reveal the mighty far-reaching graphic and applied arts of China’. ‘It has been my ambition during the course of the years that I have spent in acquiring the greatest treasures of all kinds of the greatest art country in the world’, he continued,

to give my fellow countrymen and especially the citizens of Manchester the opportunity of seeing in the actual Chinese fashion and atmosphere some of the rarest and most renowned examples of Embroideries, Wood-carvings, Bronze Altar Vessels, Buddhas of all types and sizes used in Temple Worship, War Memorials, Paintings, Tapestries, Temple Furniture, Emperors’, Princesses’ and Mandarins’ thrones and reception chairs, and all the varied ornamental equipment for Buddhistic worship.¹

To allow visitors to experience Chinese art in a supposedly Chinese fashion and atmosphere he claimed to have curated a temple wherein he banged gongs, burnt incense, chanted prayers and threw rice to perform what he referred to as the ‘great ritual of the benign and beneficent Buddha’.² The temple’s sensory effects suggested its distance from traditional museum practice, but Hilditch made a concerted effort in his opening address to root the temple in the museum’s purview. ‘All that has been shown in museums and private collections in this country’, he asserted, ‘has been a guide and a warning in the selection for the Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple, so that nothing but the highest of each branch can be seen’.³

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1. Detail from CL/ Book 2, 40. Reproduced with permission of Chetham’s Library.

There is no evidence to suggest Hilditch had ever visited a Buddhist temple or attended a ceremony. His assumption that a Buddhist setting was appropriate for the display of Chinese art suggests an essentialised understanding of Chinese art, culture and religion. Objects in

¹ Chetham’s Library/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘John Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple’, 21-22.

² CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘John Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple’, 21-22.

³ Ibid.

Buddhist temples are ‘not “things” to be merely observed’, as in a museum, but vehicles to facilitate the path to spiritual enlightenment.⁴ Moreover, Hilditch’s remark that museum and private collections had provided a ‘guide and warning’ to the temple should be understood in the context of his troubled relationship with museum experts. The temple opened just four months after Chinese art experts at the British and Victoria and Albert Museums had only selected forty-six objects his collection for exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery, raising questions over the genuineness of his objects.⁵

This article analyses Hilditch’s attempts to construct an authentic Chinese atmosphere at the temple, and the newspaper and visitor interpretations of its realism to study how China was understood and imagined in the 1920s, and how notions of ‘authenticity’ intersected with ideas about culture and race. To do so it draws on print ephemera from the temple such as the opening ceremony programme, invitation cards, scripts for Hilditch’s opening speech and ‘Buddhist’ prayers, as well as the numerous newspaper reports and photographs. The temple was well covered in the press, a consequence of Hilditch inviting representatives from the national and local press to attend exclusive previews and the opening ceremony. Papers across the cultural hierarchy, from the lofty and serious *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Manchester Guardian*, to the sensationalist *Daily Express*, *Sunday Chronicle* and *Daily Dispatch* covered the temple, providing a rich and varied insight into perceptions of authentic Chinese culture.

The temple opened when there was a ‘growing intellectual vogue for China’ in elite circles, such as the Bloomsbury and Modernists groups, and the prevalence of an exotic representation of China in popular culture served as a form of escapism for a public tired of urbanisation and recovering from the world’s first mechanised war.⁶ China served a similar function in the British imagination to ancient Egypt, as Allegra Fryxell argues Egypt’s links to

⁴ Louise Tythacott, *The Lives of Chinese Objects: Buddhism, Imperialism and Display* (Oxford, 2011), 43.

⁵ *City News*, 14 November 1925, 7.

⁶ Anne Witchard, *Thomas Burke’s Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Oxon, 2009), 85-86.

an ancient and supernatural past ‘created the discursive and performative space for a vicarious “realm of enchantment”’. Purchasing Egyptian curios and singing songs about ancient Egypt, ‘moderns vicariously re-lived the ancient world, compressing the temporal divide between Tutankhamen’s age and interwar Britain.’⁷

Like Fryxell this essay draws on Michael Saler’s work on re-enchantment to analyse the temple, but it does so not to merely demonstrate how China played a role in interwar enchantment, but, also, to assess how an ‘authentic’ Chinese atmosphere was understood, and how it could be forged. Important to this analysis is Saler’s distinction between naïve and ironic believers. Saler argued that Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘realist style’ in his Sherlock Holmes books, in the context of increased literary rates and a growing, but not yet established celebrity culture, meant some readers could not distinguish reality from imagination. Some readers, ‘naïve believers’, thought Holmes existed. At the same time, however, many readers, ‘ironic believers’, were aware of the stories’ place in the imagination, but found pleasure in ‘deceptions even when they knew they were fake’.⁸ This essay probes Hilditch’s ‘realist style’, examining the types of exhibitionary practices and Orientalist tropes he drew on, and how far they allowed viewers to believe in the temple’s authenticity, either naively or ironically.

Assessing the construction and reception of the temple’s realism has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between mass and elite culture in the interwar period. Dan LeMahieu’s work on the emergence of commercial culture and the anxieties it caused amongst the ‘cultivated elites’ has spurred scholarly investigations into the ‘battle of the brows’ in interwar Britain, predominantly in the literary context, where Modernist writers countered the threat posed by mass culture by characterizing high and low culture

⁷ Allegra Fryxell, ‘Tutankhamen, Egyptomania, and Temporal Enchantment in Interwar Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History* 28:4 (2017), 519.

⁸ Michael Saler, ‘Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes: Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890-c. 1940’, *The Historical Journal* 46:3 (2003), 606-620.

according to taste.⁹ More recently, however, scholars such as Chris Hilliard and Matt Houlbrook have questioned how stable the categories of high and low literary culture were by showing how the elites' distinctions of 'lowbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'highbrow' were far from understood or appreciated by commentators.¹⁰

Fewer studies have looked at the museum's response to commercial culture. Suzanne MacLeod and Amy Woodson-Boulton demonstrated that after the First World War museums had become 'outdated', falling behind exciting and more democratic forms of mass commercial culture. Pioneering curators and museum authorities pushed for a process of modernization, re-framing the museums social and cultural purpose along high cultural values. Moving away from the doctrine of displaying art for its civilizing influences, allowing visitors to experience its beauty, truth and story, those pushing for museum specialisation wanted viewers to consider 'color, light, composition and painting techniques' which meant architectural renovations for better lighting in galleries and fewer objects on display.¹¹ The display of Chinese art was influenced by the modernisation of museums, creating a chasm between popular and high art exhibitions of Chinese culture. The types of Chinese objects considered 'art' grew smaller as a group of influential experts, collectors and dealers with elite forms of cultural capital established a new canon of taste that extolled the expressive form of objects over decoration. At exhibitions individual Chinese works were decontextualised, set out in glass cases, on plinths and against plain backgrounds to encourage contemplation of their formal qualities.¹² Looking at folk museums Laura Carter presents an alternative version of museums in the interwar period

⁹ Dan LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 1-17, 103-121; John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London, 1992).

¹⁰ Christopher Hilliard, 'The Twopenny Library: The Book Trade, Working-Class Readers, and 'Middlebrow' Novels in Britain, 1930-42, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25: 2 (2014), 215-220. Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (London, 2016), 223-228.

¹¹ Suzanne MacLeod, *Museum Architecture: A New Biography* (London, 2013), 80-108. See also Amy Woodson Boulton, *Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain* (Stanford, 2012), 125-149; 150-174.

¹² Judith Green, 'A New Orientation of Ideas: Collecting and the Taste for Early Chinese Ceramics in England 1921-36', in Stacey Pierson (ed.), *Collecting Chinese Art: Interpretation and Display* (London, 2000), 43-56; Tythacott, *The Lives of Chinese Objects*, 162-169.

demonstrating how tactile and immersive educational techniques were used to display vernacular collections, which often proved more popular with audiences than more ‘traditional’ museums.¹³ Similarly, Kate Hill has shown that at the smaller, less well funded provincial museums where the professionalisation process was slow and the boundaries with popular culture more blurred, ‘everyday’ and ‘domestic’ objects were displayed in mimetic settings. Even here, though, art objects were treated as dead artefacts and displayed in a decontextualised and aesthetic manner.¹⁴

While museums may have been conservative in their display of art, this was a period of experimentation in the arts, embodied in the avant-garde artists, designers and architects who recognised ‘existing museums as cemeteries for art’, but saw exhibitions as a ‘new and exciting form of mass media’ that could facilitate an ‘unprecedented relationship between media and audience’. Using mediums such as peepholes, these pioneers subverted the boundaries of art, theatre and Victorian popular culture, creating immersive experiences. Hilditch existed outside this social and cultural elite and while the temple collapsed the boundaries between high and low culture to ‘overcome the separation between art and the everyday’, it lacked the avant-garde’s coherent ideological aim to disrupt the museum as a cultural authority.¹⁵ In fact, museum conceptions of authenticity were central to the temple’s value presenting a fresh angle through which to consider the relationship between museums and mass culture, and elite and mass culture more generally. Whereas scholars have argued that the boundaries between museum and non-museum exhibitions, art and curios, as well as between representations of China in high and low culture in the exhibitionary context were becoming increasingly distinct in the 1920s, this essay contends that the interpretation of the temple as a museum and faith in

¹³ Laura Carter, ‘Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Twentieth-Century British History* 28:4 (2017), 543-569. See also Geoffrey Ginn, ‘An Ark for England: Esoteric Heritage at J.S.M. Ward’s Abbey Folk Park, 1934-1940’, *Journal of the History of Collections*, 22 (2010), 129-140.

¹⁴ Kate Hill, ‘Collecting Authenticity: Domestic, Familial, and Everyday ‘Old Things’ in English Museums, 1850-1939’, *Museum History Journal*, 4:2, 203-222.

¹⁵ Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead, 2006), 60-64

its authenticity suggests these lines were blurred. This complicates the histories of museum professionalisation by demonstrating how museum displays of ‘art’ accommodated, rather than rejected, mass cultural forms, and prompts us to reconsider what constituted a museum in the early twentieth century. It also has broader implications for our understanding of the interwar ‘battle of the brows’ as it demonstrates how unstable the categories of high and low culture were.

John Hilditch and his networks

Hilditch grew up in a working-class Wesleyan household in Sandbach, a small market town in Cheshire on the outskirts of the North West’s industrial centres. After basic schooling, he worked as an apprenticeship engine fitter, before becoming a sales agent for Singer Sewing Company in Manchester. By the mid 1920s he was Manager of a Singer branch and had a collection of around 2,500 Chinese ceramics, bronzes, textiles and jades. As I have explored elsewhere, he was motivated by an ambition to exhibit his collection, an ambition that manifested in a seventeen-year struggle with Manchester’s Art Galleries Committee. To support his argument that his collection belonged at Manchester Art Gallery, he lied about his authority and his collection’s value, for instance claiming he amassed his collection while traveling China and it was worth £250,000. He challenged the Art Galleries Committee and the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum experts they used to evaluate his collection, but he was unsuccessful in exhibiting at Manchester Art Gallery. He did find opportunities to exhibit at smaller provincial museums, however, lending his collection to museums in Stretford, Rochdale, Salford, Leigh and Batley between 1926 and 1930.¹⁶

Hilditch’s fabrications make it hard to discern whether he wanted to exhibit his collection for social prestige, economic gain or out of public service. Focusing on such

¹⁶ Author, ‘Museums, Culture and the Hilditch Collection: The Contest for Cultural Authority in Early Twentieth-Century Britain’, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2020. For a brief overview see Richard Gray, ‘The Hilditch Affair’, *The Museums Journal* 80 (1979), 93-94

questions tends to close avenues of historical enquiry and thus instead this article uses Hilditch to see how people outside the art elites conceptualised exhibitions, and the networks they could negotiate to construct them. At the provincial museums Hilditch curated exhibitions that corresponded with the conventional modes of display but at the temple he used his position outside the elite art network to construct a sensory art exhibition which was more dynamic than the type permitted by art galleries and museums. To do so he negotiated museum and non-museum networks.

His relationship with McGill was crucial to the venture as she provided space and a fashionable address. Hilditch's house 'Minglands' was already full of Chinese objects and its location in Crumpsall, North Manchester lacked the cultural cachet of Victoria Park, even if Victoria Park was no longer the preserve of Manchester's wealthy. McGill also provided the temple objects. At the temple's opening ceremony Hilditch inferred that the objects were part of his collection, but the contents of the temple actually belonged to McGill, though this was not revealed in the press until after Hilditch's estate had been posthumously valued.¹⁷ McGill was a widow, in receipt of an annuity of £3,000 from her late husband who was a merchant and it is tempting to see Hilditch seizing the temple as an opportunity to flex McGill's financial muscle to purchase expensive objects, which he could then claim were his.¹⁸ McGill does seem to have had an interest in Chinese art and culture though, which probably explains how they met. In 1921 won prizes at a Free Trade Ball for their Chinese costumes and in the spring and summer months of 1924 they were the focus of media attention for introducing and dancing the 'Chinese Tango' in ballrooms across Manchester and London.¹⁹ As with the temple, Hilditch dominated the press coverage of the 'Chinese Tango' and thus it is hard to determine the extent of McGill's interest in China. The temple services stopped with Hilditch's death in 1930, and

¹⁷ *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1930, 7.

¹⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 August 1911, 10.

¹⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 March 1921, 70-71. CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, 16-20; 55-60.

the contents were put up for auction two years later because McGill needed space for a car, suggesting that Hilditch was the driving force behind the display. That said, the fact McGill still called her house 'Pekin Villa' on the 1939 register demonstrates her enthusiasm for China.²⁰

With no log of McGill's purchases, it is challenging to know where she bought them, and what prices she paid. The Capes, Dunn and Co. auction catalogue for the sale of the temple objects in 1932 indicates that there were around 372 objects in the temple, including bronzes, embroideries, ceramics and wood panels. Five of the objects up for sale – a bronze canon, two bronze lions, a bronze temple lamp and a bronze Buddha – came from the J. R. Twentyman collection, which was sold at auction in 1928, showing the temple display was updated after its opening and providing a hint as to where McGill, or Hilditch bought some of the objects.²¹

Twentyman was the manager of ship building firm based in Shanghai and his extensive collection included military and religious objects, many of which were looted from the Old Summer Palace in Beijing in 1900.²² As such he was part of the process whereby following the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860), large quantities of Chinese antiques, seized by British imperial agents, including soldiers, doctors and engineers were transported to Britain. This process was further accelerated during the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), and the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, which saw the Qing Dynasty fall and the imperial governance system end. There was a plenitude of Chinese antiquities available to British collectors on the art market, through dealers and auctions and lower middle- and middle-class consumers also had access to 'old China' through department stores, such as Liberty's and Debenhams. The unequal power relation between East and West allowed these department stores' agents to take advantage of

²⁰ Manchester Art Gallery Archive, "Hilditch Affair", '*Daily Dispatch*, 20 October 1932'; "McGill, Lucy C. D." *1939 England and Wales Register*; The National Archives; Kew, London, England; 1939 Register Ref: RG101/4486J/011/13 Letter Code: NJVN.

²¹ Messrs. Capes, Dunn and Co., 'The Chinese Palace Temple' (Manchester, 1932), 3-17.

²² *The Times*, 9 October 1928, 13.

China's economic, political and social turmoil, purchasing furniture, embroideries and porcelain in China at low prices.²³ With McGill's purchasing power they would have had relatively easy access to a range of Chinese antiques.

William Lever's involvement at the temple, as well as that of Sydney Davison, curator of Lady Lever Art Gallery who read the 'Buddhist prayers', connected the temple to the museum network. Most likely thanks to Hilditch's brother's role as Secretary of Cheshire Society, Hilditch delivered a lecture on Chinese art collecting to the Society at Lady Lever Art Gallery in 1923, when Lever's father (an avid Chinese art collector) and curator Davison were present. In 1924 Hilditch lectured twice more at the gallery and Hilditch and McGill's first rendition of the Chinese Tango was performed at Lever senior's house at a charity ball the same year. Hilditch gifted an object from his collection to the gallery in Lever Senior's remembrance following his death in 1925 which may have also been an attempt to cement his relationship with the gallery, and potentially influenced Lever and Davison's involvement at the temple.²⁴ Lever junior was neither a collector of Chinese art nor rooted in the localised civic culture of Manchester and therefore perhaps unaware of Hilditch's notoriety in elite art circles. Lever admitted that his involvement was probably down to his father's interest in Chinese art, rather than his own.²⁵

Lever was not the only civic dignitary involved in the opening ceremony. After Hilditch's address, Sir William Milligan, Doctor at the Manchester Royal Infirmary, Chief Constable Sir Robert Peacock, businessmen Sir William Veno and John Cuming Walters, editor of the *City News* gave thanks, secondary thanks and supported thanks.²⁶ Hilditch and McGill were mixing in the same circles as Peacock, who attended the same balls and sometimes judged

²³ Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain* (Bern, 2007), 81-113; Sarah Cheang, 'Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store', *Journal of Design History* 20:1 (2007), 4-8.

²⁴ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, 2, 61, 63, 71; Book 2 'Daily Post and Mercury, 13 May 1925', 9.

²⁵ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Daily News, 15 February 1926', 42.

²⁶ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'The Chinese Palace Temple Opening Ceremony', 19.

the fancy dress. It is likely that Walters, who was Hilditch's associate since 1913, played a crucial role in developing the network. As editor of the *City News*, he was well connected in the city and perhaps rallied on Hilditch's behalf for the support of Manchester's social elites. Networks of voluntary associations gave coherence to a 'middle class' divided by status, religion and politics, and presumably Walters negotiated similar civic and cultural networks to Milligan, Peacock and Veno. The temple's position in Manchester and professed status as an educational venture probably persuaded these men, who had differing professions, religious and political beliefs (Veno a Conservative and Milligan a Liberal) but a shared interest in culture and local affairs, to participate.²⁷

That none of the dignitaries involved were experts in Chinese art or Buddhism is telling of Hilditch's position outside the scholarly clique. The fact that Sir William Clare Lees, President of the Chamber of Commerce, was supposed to be reading the prayers but was replaced at the last minute by Davison – the only one employed at a gallery – suggests that Hilditch placed more value on the social capital individuals could attach to the temple. Presumably he granted Lever more responsibility than the other dignitaries at the temple – his speech was the main event – in exchange for the validation bestowed by Lever's exclusive social status and his father's association with Chinese art. These dignitaries' association with the Victorian legacy of public service did shroud the temple in the connotations of respectability and aligned it with more conventional civic cultural institutions.

Constructing Realism

²⁷ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, 'Daily Dispatch, 6 December 1924', 60; R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party; The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990), 167-170; William Brockbank, *The Honorary Medical Staff of the Manchester Royal Infirmary, 1830-1948* (Manchester, 1965), 113-116; T. A. B. Corby, 'Veno, Sir William Henry', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2005) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/93363>> [Accessed 14 November 2021].

Entrance to the temple was free, but first visitors had to obtain a signed permit from Hilditch.²⁸ Hilditch could control who came in but whether he targeted a particular audience is difficult to ascertain. He included applications for permits to the temple at the back of the catalogues to his exhibitions of Chinese art at Salford and Leigh in 1928, suggesting he sought to appeal to an art gallery-visiting crowd.²⁹ The placing of these applications in a gallery catalogue, and the fact admission was free, associated the temple with public museum culture, but the rules printed on the visitors' permit – 'Do Not Touch', 'Do Not Speak', 'Follow in the Footsteps of Your Guide' – indicated how the temple experience would differ from conventional galleries. Those who had visited galleries before would have been familiar with the rule 'Do Not Touch', but the restrictions on talking and walking went further than museums in their attempts to police visitor behaviour.

Hilditch's rules and use of rituals at the temple can be read as his effort to establish the visitor's role as a receptive one and encourage silent concentration and contemplation, thereby underscoring the temple's sacredness.³⁰ After passing through the temple garden (Figure 2), visitors had to knock on the temple door before following a guide dressed in Chinese robes to their seat inside. Four candles in each corner of the room illuminated the temple. Once all the visitors were seated, red lights began to flicker as Hilditch, also dressed in Chinese robes, banged gongs and rang bells. Next, Hilditch chanted prayers, lit incense, burned 'prayer scrolls' and threw rice over the idols and the congregation as the room was gradually illuminated, revealing the idols and artefacts. Visitors were then taken in groups to a small room modelled as the Empress' robing room to look at an assortment of embroideries. Finally, they returned to the temple where gongs and bells were sounded, and the room was slowly plunged back into darkness. Once the noise had stopped, they followed their guide back to the temple garden and

²⁸ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Daily Dispatch, 13 February 1926', 27.

²⁹ John Hilditch, *Illustrated Catalogue of a Chinese Exhibition* (Manchester, 1927), back page; John Hilditch, *Illustrated Catalogue of a Chinese Exhibition* (Leigh, 1928), back page.

³⁰ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London, 1995), 11-13.

were free to go, though sometimes Hilditch would conclude the ceremony with a lecture on Chinese art.³¹

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2. Detail from CL/ Book 2, 40. Reproduced with permission of Chetham's Library.

Hilditch's attempt to control the visitor's body should not be seen as coming at the expense of the interactive nature of the display. As with theatre, Hilditch's body was the vehicle through which the seated audience viscerally engaged with the ritual. Moreover, unlike the static displays of art in galleries, including Hilditch's exhibitions at provincial museums, at the temple he used lighting effects, sound and smell to create a sensory experience that engaged the audience. Hilditch may have lifted these techniques from music hall comedy where they were used to transport the viewer through time and space. During the Easter festivities at the Imperial Hydro on the North Shore, Blackpool in 1920, Hilditch, dressed in Chinese robes, assumed the identity of 'Chu Chin Chow' to hand out the sports prizes.³² Dressing up as 'Chu Chin Chow' Hilditch clearly referenced the play, which he probably watched when it played the Theatre Royal in Manchester for four weeks in the summer 1919.³³ The next section will assess the depiction of China in the play in more detail, but here it is important to note that *Chu Chin Chow* was praised for its stage design and its director Oscar Asche was well known for his innovations in staging and lighting design to create realism.³⁴

The early twentieth century was an important period for all forms of theatre as the rise of cinema threatened their cultural significance. The cinema was able to reproduce real events on the screen and use editing techniques to provide them in quick succession, something the

³¹ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Blackley, Prestwich and Crumpsall Guardian, 19 June 1926', 27; *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 8 January 1930, 6.

³² Untitled newspaper clipping in Edwin Sims-Hilditch Scrapbook from family's private archive.

³³ *Manchester Guardian*, 11 August 1919, 12.

³⁴ Brian Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism, and British Musical Comedy* (Westport, 2004), 93.

theatre lacked. In the 1920s the documentary movement was in its infancy, but films such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), as well as newsreels, provided photographic representations of actual events.³⁵ However, as Emily Curtis Walters argues, the use of sound in cinema was in its infancy and '[w]here the cinema could offer spectators the illusion of looking in, the theater provided the multisensory impression of being there'. Understanding the significance of 'live performance elements', interwar cinema exhibitors drew on theatre techniques, such as including a stage sets with actors.³⁶ Indeed, Hilditch was aware of this practice. When the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester showed the American Orientalist silent movie *The Forbidden City* in Easter 1925, Hilditch lent his collection to transform the cinema cafe into a 'Chinese Haunt' and he performed as the Chinese Mandarin during the prologue.³⁷ His involvement at the cinema probably influenced his understanding of realism effects.

In the 1920s using sensory effects to create authentic environments was well established in the exhibitionary context. This curatorial practice, based on the educational ideal that visitors could learn about foreign and past cultures through direct engagement with authentic recreations, had its origins in the mid-nineteenth century and was prevalent at international fairs, as well as missionary exhibitions. Born out of the Great Exhibition (1851) at Hyde Park, Crystal Palace (1854-1936) on Sydenham Hill in South London provided 'virtual tourism' for visitors as they passed through 'Ten Chief Courts'. These courts were styled according to ancient civilisations, such as Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Rome, with the intention that visitors would learn lessons about history and art through experiencing them.³⁸ By the 1920s

³⁵ Laura Marcus, 'Cinematic Realism: "A Recreation of the World in its Own Image"', in Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford, 2007), 177-192.

³⁶ Emily Curtis Walters, 'Between Entertainment and Elegy: The Unexpected Success of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928)', *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016), 359.

³⁷ *City News*, 4 April 1925, 1.

³⁸ Alexander Chase Levenson, 'Annihilating Time and Space: Eclecticism and Virtual Tourism at the Sydenham Crystal Palace', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 34:5 (2012), 466-471.

exhibitions of this type included even more types of sensory experience of foreign cultures, which was possibly an attempt to keep these exhibitions relevant in the face of new forms of mass media and their offer of realistic spectacle. The Hong Kong display at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924-1925, for instance, was complete with an architectural reconstruction of a Chinese street comprising shops selling incense and curios as well as a Chinese restaurant where visitors were served Chinese food, such as 'birds' nest soup' by natives in the accompaniment of a Chinese orchestra.³⁹

Sadiah Qureshi has shown that the involvement of colonial people was used to market the authenticity of exhibitions, but if Chinese people had helped Hilditch with the temple, their role appears to have been restricted to behind-the-scenes work, as it was Hilditch, along with four English assistants that conducted the ceremony.⁴⁰ Perhaps, for instance, they helped translate 'Hilditch-McGill Palace Temple' into Chinese characters for the sign in the temple garden (Figure 2). It is possible that Hilditch asked Chinese residents in Manchester to assist him with the services but had been rejected, but their omission is more likely down to the fact he wanted to cement his status as the authority of the temple. By donning Chinese robes, Hilditch added a heightened sense of reality to the display than would have been created if he had worn English clothes, while simultaneously increasing his supposed authority; he was both museum guide and Buddhist Priest. Aware of the authenticity Chinese people could add to the temple, Hilditch claimed the 'Temple is so true to fact that if I wish I could have Chinese people chanting here any day'.⁴¹

Hilditch's immersive exhibition at the temple clashed with the new modes of display at progressive metropolitan galleries, such as Walker Art Gallery and Manchester Art Gallery, which pushed for fewer objects on display and against plain backgrounds to emphasise the

³⁹ Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-49* (Manchester, 1999), 50-51.

⁴⁰ Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Empire, Exhibitions and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2011), 118, 166.

⁴¹ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'City News, 13 February 1926', 30-33.

object's aesthetic features.⁴² This did not mean, however, that elite museums did not also use more immersive curatorial techniques for other displays. Though not used for displays of Chinese art, the Victoria and Albert Museum comprised 'period room' displays, such as the Sérilly Room, a reconstruction of an eighteenth-century French boudoir. Marie-Ève Marchand argues that period rooms were related to the 'illusionistic settings' like those at international and imperial fairs as both were built on the idea that reality effects could catch the visitors' attention and offer the unique possibility to encounter foreign worlds.⁴³ At the same time, however, museums tried to align their period rooms with the institution's 'educational and scientific ambitions', so as to distance their displays from the commercial exhibitions. Curators paid special attention 'to the genuineness and historical provenance' of the objects within the period room, therefore associating it with the museum's values of connoisseurship.⁴⁴ This differed from the notion of authenticity promulgated at commercial exhibitions like at Crystal Palace, where historical exactness was a secondary concern as replica artefacts and architectural elements were used to create the 'essence' of ancient civilisations.⁴⁵

Additionally, the museum period rooms did not contain 'live' performative elements, tempering the sensationalism and making the display more aligned to 'aesthetic educational purposes'.⁴⁶ Echoing the snobbery and anxieties of the 'cultivated elites' examined by LeMahieu, many museum critics were anxious that too much spectacle in the museum would attract 'gapers'; working-class visitors who came for entertainment not instruction, and therefore lowered the tone of the institution.⁴⁷ Borrowing elements of illusionistic settings to gain the public's attention while underlining their purpose as educational by centring displays

⁴² MacLeod, *Museum Architecture*, 80-108; Woodson Boulton, *Transformative Beauty*, 160.

⁴³ Marie-Ève Marchand, 'A Parisian Boudoir in London: The South Kensington Sérilly Museum', *Journal of Design History*, 31:2 (2018), 170-172.

⁴⁴ Marchand, 'A Parisian Boudoir in London', 170-172.

⁴⁵ Levenson, 'Annihilating Time and Space', 466-469.

⁴⁶ Marchand, 'A Parisian Boudoir in London', 170-172.

⁴⁷ Allison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York, 2008), 167-172; LeMahieu, *A Culture For Democracy*, 103-107.

on scientific values, can be seen as an attempt to establish the museum's lofty position in the burgeoning field of mass consumer culture and the competition to provide realism.

Hilditch's temple occupied its own position on the cultural horizon, drawing from the music hall and theatre, commercial exhibitions and museums. The live elements may have distanced it from the latter, but Hilditch firmly claimed museum values had steered his display. He even claimed to have used 'archaeological, histological, chemical and spectrum tests' on the objects to determine their authenticity.⁴⁸ There is no evidence to suggest Hilditch had access to or knowledge of scientific methods of art authentication, but his claim demonstrates how he tapped into a museum process that Roger Luckhurst describes as 'artefaction', the turning of ancient objects into museum artefacts. At the British Museum 'artefaction' was used as an attempt to dispel a supposedly cursed Egyptian mummy's links to the supernatural through the 'taxonomic' process.⁴⁹ In contrast, at the temple, Hilditch combined claims to scientific tests with a ritual centred on the supernatural. This combination of science and supernatural speaks to Saler's characterisation of modern enchantment as it was Holmes' use of animistic reason that allowed adults to 'immerse themselves in imaginary worlds without relinquishing their practical reason.'⁵⁰ Similarly, the occult sideshows at seaside towns such as Blackpool appealed to the 'bewitching qualities' of modern technology by drawing on 'scientific motifs to attract custom'. Just as the Mass Observers viewed these machines as exploiting 'science's cachet in an appeal to "progressive" reason', Hilditch's claim to have scientifically authenticated the objects can be read as an attempt to forge the authenticity of the temple, promising enchantment, without abandonment of practical reason.⁵¹

Sham Buddhism

⁴⁸ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'John Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple', 21-22.

⁴⁹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Mummy's Curse: The True History of a Dark Fantasy* (Oxford, 2012), 134-151.

⁵⁰ Saler, 'Clap', 605-606.

⁵¹ Jennie Taylor, 'Pennies from Heaven and Earth in Mass Observation's Blackpool', *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012) 142-143; 154.

Hilditch's 'actual' temple produced a sham Buddhism, which collapsed some elements of Buddhist practice into well-established Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese culture. Figure 1 demonstrates how he followed some conventions of temple organisation, elevating the deities and flanking them with 'Dogs of Fo'. One object in the temple was a Chinese painting of a temple interior, which may have provided the visual clues to the temple set up though 'factual' information on Chinese temples was easily accessible for the English public at this time, as travellers, diplomats and missionaries produced a vast literature confidently claiming to explain the character of Chinese religions. Those who travelled to China also staged exhibitions of Chinese religious material culture, lectured on Chinese customs and used photographs or lanternslides to illustrate their findings.⁵² Hilditch would have had ample source material from which to construct his temple. Indeed, the 'prayers' Hilditch used can be traced back – word for word – to August Karl Reischauer's *Studies in Japanese Buddhism* (1917) showing that Hilditch was engaging with academic texts on Buddhism. The fact he assumed the similarities of Japanese and Chinese Buddhism, a casual collapse of distinct cultures, shows how he embodied the mislaid arrogance of British observers who claimed to be authorities on generic Asian cultures.⁵³

Hilditch labelled the objects in the temple examples of 'graphic and applied arts of China', but it included a Japanese suit of armour and it is likely the deity shown in Figure 2 is Burmese. That the temple included many bronze statues, objects Tythacott argues fit the elite collector and curators' conceptualisation of 'art' based on "primitivist" aesthetics', suggests the temple comprised objects of aesthetic value. However, other objects in the temple, such as 'slippers', 'Chinese sun hat', and a cannon show how Hilditch pushed the definition of 'art'.⁵⁴

⁵² Messrs. Capes, Dunn and Co., 'The Chinese Palace Temple', 15; Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religions* (London, 2004), 22-38.

⁵³ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Translations from Prayers in the Palace Temple', 25-26; August Karl Reischauer, *Studies in Japanese Buddhism* (New York, 1917), 283-295.

⁵⁴ Tythacott, *The Lives of Chinese Objects*, 163; Messrs. Capes, Dunn and Co., 'The Chinese Palace Temple' 3-17.

As many of the objects did not carry any intrinsic religious meaning either, they show how Hilditch's 'actual' temple conflated Chinese religious practices and culture to produce a totalising impression of exotic Chinese culture which was closer to the missionary exhibitions of Chinese curios.⁵⁵

In the Chinese art context, Imperial provenance denoted an object's quality and rarity, and therefore Hilditch's claim that temples of this kind were usually restricted to the Imperial family and 'highly placed court officials' may have been an attempt to legitimise the quality of the objects. By associating the temple with Imperial China he also wrapped it in connotations of luxury, exoticness and mystery, tropes that had dominated British perceptions of China's elite since the sixteenth century. The revolution of 1911 had ended China's Imperial system and spurred a process of Westernization, but a 'nostalgia for the old China of mandarins and pagodas' became particularly prevalent in Britain.⁵⁶ Hilditch wore mandarin's robes to conduct the temple ceremony, which he told visitors belonged to 'the Keeper of the Treasures of the Chinese Palace' showing again how he collapsed Buddhism into an essentialised image of Chinese culture.⁵⁷

The ritual Hilditch performed at the temple reproduced stereotypes of China as a pre-modern exotic land of mysticism and mystery. Banging drums, gongs and bronze bells Hilditch claimed to be 'exorcizing' 'evil spirits' (a practice not found in Buddhism as evil spirits are appeased, rather than dispelled).⁵⁸ Hilditch furthered this metaphor by explaining the ceremony was centred on the 'passing of darkness to light', an ambiguous religious spiritual metaphor which was perhaps loosely based on the Buddhist teaching of enlightenment. He even used electric lighting to visualise this transition.⁵⁹ China had long existed in Western minds as a

⁵⁵ Sarah Cheang, "Our Missionary Wembley": China, Local Community and the British Missionary Empire, 1901-1924', *East Asian History* 32:33 (2006), 180-188.

⁵⁶ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Daily Dispatch', 13 February 1926', 27-28; Cheang, 'Selling China', 2-7.

⁵⁷ *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 8 January 1930, p. 6.

⁵⁸ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Daily Dispatch', 13 February 1926', 27-28.

⁵⁹ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Morning Post', 13 February 1926', 'Daily Dispatch', 15 February 1926', 35-38.

romantic land of mysticism, but scientific developments in late eighteenth and nineteenth century shaped popular understandings of China as ‘superstitious and backward as only a heathen place could be’.⁶⁰ Academic studies on Buddhism, in addition to ethnographic and popular travel writing on China documented the Buddhist appeasement of spirits while also remarking on the widely held Chinese belief in the presence of spirits in the air, both good and evil. It is possible Hilditch’s ritual was inspired by the reference made in such works to the traditional Chinese cultural practice of banging drums and cymbals to dispel ‘evil spirits’.⁶¹ Either way he overlooked the nuances of Chinese Buddhism, creating a ritual based on the generalised trope of Chinese superstition.

Framing the ritual around the casting away of evil spirits did add a sinister facet to the ceremony but if the temple bore signs of Orientalism, it was more complex than a simplistic notion of rampant sinophobia. As Witchard argues, ‘popular’ representations of China and Chinese culture in the 1920s, such as D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919), a cinematic remake of Burke’s *The Chink and the Child* (1916), evidence a shift toward a more sympathetic representation of China and Chinese culture. The film was also gentler than earlier sinophobic representations of Buddhism as it followed the endeavours of a young ‘mandarin’ travelling to the West ‘convinced that the great nations across the sea need the lessons of the gentle Buddha’.⁶² Buddhism in Rohmer’s *The Devil Doctor* (1916), on the contrary, is characterised by mystery, evil and duplicitousness. When English detective and clumsy hero Dr. Petrie grabs a silver Buddha in an antique shop it turns out not to be a religious item, but a handle to Fu Manchu’s lair.⁶³ At the temple Hilditch lauded Chinese art and described the Buddha as ‘benign

⁶⁰ Witchard, *Thomas Burke’s*, 65-76.

⁶¹ Joseph Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism: A Volume of Sketches, Historical, Descriptive and Critical* (London, 1880), 126, 268, 389; Arthur Henderson Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (Shanghai, 1890), 116, 212, 365; Isabella Bird, *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond: An Account of Journeys in China, Chiefly in the Province of Sze Chuan and Among the Man-tze of the Somo Territory* (London, 1899), 127, 162, 523-524.

⁶² D. W. Griffiths, *Broken Blossoms* (1919).

⁶³ Sax Rohmer, *The Devil Doctor* (London, 1916), 137-139.

and beneficent’ suggesting his conception of Chinese culture was closer to *Broken Blossoms* than *The Devil Doctor*.⁶⁴

Repeating the Orientalist stereotypes of a supernatural, Hilditch tapped into the popular enthusiasm for ancient ‘Eastern’ cultures in the aftermath of the First World War. ‘Egyptomania’ swept Britain after the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb, as Britons were drawn to ancient Egypt for ‘enchantment’. Hilditch engaged with this craze he and McGill danced the ‘King tut tango’ at the Rivoli dance theatre in 1924. Their Chinese Tango can be seen as attempt to forge their own place in the dance scene by appealing to Orientalist notions of China’s timelessness; Hilditch claimed the dance was based on ‘Chinese rhythmic movements of 3,000 years ago’.⁶⁵ The Chinese Tango, and Chinese temple were part of the plethora of books, plays, movies and exhibitions depicting China as an enchanting but somewhat dangerous place, which likely inspired Hilditch’s imagining of China. Hilditch presumably watched *The Forbidden City* when he lent objects to the Gaiety Theatre and would have seen a version of China was described as ‘the land of a thousand yesterdays’ and centred on cunning mandarins and a cruel Emperor.⁶⁶ Furthermore, *Chu Chin Chow* combined a musical comedy format with characters, stock devices, parades, pageants and transformational scenes from pantomime and peddled well-established Orientalist themes of luxury, treachery and effeminacy. Not only did *Chu Chin Chow*’s ‘spectacle, splendour and entertainment’ offer audiences temporary escape, its message of Britons ‘winning against the odds’ found particular resonance during a long, energy and morale sapping war. The play, which premiered at His Majesty’s Theatre in London in 1916 and ran until 1921, became the first musical to play over two thousand performances in Britain.⁶⁷ Although references to Chinese Buddhism in *Chu Chin*

⁶⁴ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘John Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple’, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁵ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, ‘City News, 4 October 1924’, ‘Daily Dispatch, 6 December 1924’, 59-60.

⁶⁶ Sidney Franklin, *The Forbidden City* (1918).

⁶⁷ Singleton, *Oscar Asche*, 109-138; William Everett, ‘*Chu Chin Chow* and Orientalist Musical Theatre in Britain during the First World War’, in Martin Clayton and Bennet Zon (eds.), *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s-1940s: Portrayal of the East* (Aldershot, 2007), 281-284.

Chow are scant, it comprised other signifiers of Chinese culture that Hilditch used at the temple, such as mandarin robes, gongs, cymbals, incense and lighting effects.⁶⁸

Alongside his engagement of popular cultural representations of China, Hilditch was reading scholarly works on Chinese art, and visiting art exhibitions too. These high cultural forms exoticised China, but in a distinct, more subtle way to popular representations. The catalogue for Manchester Art Gallery's *Chinese Applied Art Exhibition* in 1913 noted how the Chinese are 'content to live and work under ancient ideals that have changed so slowly as to seem incapable of change'.⁶⁹ Hilditch read *The Later Ceramic Wares of China* (1924) by the British Museum's Hobson, which claimed 'the ignorant masses [in China] live surrounded by invisible powers, benignant spirits which must be courted and malignant demons which must be propitiated or repelled'.⁷⁰ Merging popular and academic visions of China at the temple, Hilditch's catholic tastes perhaps reflect the cultural habitus of a man from a working-class background steeped in popular culture, who did not eschew these tastes during his pursuit of cultural distinction as a collector and expert of Chinese art.

Hilditch's Wesleyan background provides an additional framework in which to consider his wide-reaching engagements with different kinds of China. Ostensibly speaking, re-enacting Buddhist ceremonies might have sat uneasily with his non-conformism. Contemporary historians Robert Graves and Alan Hodges' noticed interwar Britons were increasingly looking to Buddhism, as well as other religions and philosophies from China and India for spiritual nourishment following the harrowing experience of the war.⁷¹ Christmas Humphreys, an English lawyer founded the Buddhist Society, London in 1924 where he taught Buddhism in relation to the practical and ethical realities of everyday British life. Buddhism's connection to

⁶⁸ Singleton, *Oscar Asche*, 113.

⁶⁹ William Burton, *A Catalogue of an Exhibition of Chinese Applied Art* (Manchester, 1913), p. 9.

⁷⁰ R. L. Hobson, *The Later Ceramic Wares of China* (London, 1924), 124-126. Hilditch quoted from the publication in a letter to the editor in *The Museum Journal*, May 1928, 364.

⁷¹ Robert Graves, Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London, 1940), 201-204.

the masculine culture of self-help made its teachings appealing to British men.⁷² Unlike these ‘sympathisers’, there was no spiritual depth to Hilditch’s relationship with Buddhism; he labelled the ‘Buddhist bible’ ‘clumsy’.⁷³ Creating the temple for exhibitionary purposes rather than religious service or enlightenment, Hilditch’s understanding of China seems to parallel that of the Protestant missionaries who saw Buddhist rituals as ‘a kind of absurd theatre, in which a nation of actors engaged in stylized fictions full of sounds and fury but signifying nothing’.⁷⁴ Given Hilditch’s slippery relationship with the truth, it is difficult to discern whether even he believed in his temple’s accuracy. However, his sense of entitlement to construct the temple and claim its authenticity does suggest that he had interiorised the British sense of authority over Chinese culture.

‘Awesome Realism’

The local journalists who experienced the temple ritual described it as ‘alien and unfriendly’, ‘unnatural’, ‘weird’, ‘oppressive’, ‘eerie’ and ‘mysterious’.⁷⁵ Even the *City News*’ account, which was not based on the opening ceremony but a one-to-one tour of the temple with Hilditch, described the ‘uncanny’ effect of being confronted by a multitude of Chinese idols.⁷⁶ That the *City News* report gave the most detail on the character of the objects in the temple is indicative of the educational benefit of personal instruction by Hilditch, but even this account commented on the temple’s unsettling effects. Hilditch clearly played his part in constructing the scariness of the temple; he framed the ritual around evil spirits after all. However, he also made reference to the ‘benign’ Buddha. Popular perceptions of China, such as Rohmer’s had imbued the

⁷² Alison Falby, ‘Buddhist Psychologies and Masculinity in Early Twentieth-Century Britain’, in Lucy Delap and Sue Morgan (eds.), *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2013), 44-47.

⁷³ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘Translations from Prayers in the Palace Temple’, 25-26

⁷⁴ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods*, 96-97.

⁷⁵ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘Daily Dispatch’, 13 February 1926; ‘Sunday Chronicle’, 14 February 1926; ‘Manchester Guardian’, 15 February 1926; ‘Manchester Evening News’, 13 February 1926, 27-38; *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 8 January 1930, 6

⁷⁶ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, ‘City News’, 13 February 1926, 30-33.

features of temple worship Hilditch drew upon, such as lighting incense, with the connotations of darkness, mystery and violence. The newspapers' framing of the temple around the themes of mystery and horror, then, suggests that they drew on stock conceptualisations of Chinese religion as primitive and heathen.

For the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent who clearly was not shy in demonstrating their cultural capital, the atmosphere did have a distorting effect, but it was more ridiculous, than realistic. This liberal newspaper committed to quality journalism drew in a national well-educated readership through its serious coverage of political, social and cultural news. When discussing the lighting effects, the reporter sarcastically questioned whether the Ming Dynasty had 'these resources of stagecraft'. The journalist stated the art collection was 'stupefying in its profusion', and that following the ceremony they 'came out with a passionate desire to run somewhere and look at a white wall with an etching on it'.⁷⁷ In contrast, the journalists for the cheaper, more sensationalist papers, like the *Manchester Evening News* and *Evening Chronicle*, did not question the authenticity of the temple suggesting they had no idea what a temple should look like. Their reiteration of Hilditch's claims to the temple's status as a faithful replica, highlights how ignorance of Chinese culture in the non-specialist press meant his fabrications were not challenged. More than this, though, the trust invested in the temple's representation of Chinese culture suggests how pervasive, and persuasive the stereotypes Hilditch had appropriated were in the British imagination. The *Daily Dispatch* claimed Hilditch had 'successfully attained' the object of reproducing the 'weird ritual peculiar to a palace temple in China' and the *Sunday Chronicle* championed the temple's 'awesome realism', suggesting that the temple ritual matched their Orientalist understanding, or conception of Chinese religious ceremonies as unnerving.⁷⁸ Mixing symbols of temple worship with Orientalist impressions

⁷⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 15 February 1926, 11.

⁷⁸ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Evening Chronicle, 13 February 1926', 'Manchester Evening News, 13 February 1926' 'Daily Dispatch, 15 February 1926', 'Sunday Chronicle, 14 February 1926', 34-36.

served to reaffirm the popular perception of Chinese culture and paradoxically, underscore the temple's 'authenticity'.

The extent to which mutated stereotypes of 'Eastern' cultures could be believed in the interwar period is evidenced in the court case between Ali Fahmy and Marguerite Marie Laurent in 1923. Lucy Bland used the case to demonstrate that the repetition of Orientalist tropes, projected through the lens of spectacle, allowed individuals to manipulate the truth. Marguerite had shot dead her Egyptian husband Fahmy but was not charged with murder or manslaughter. During the court case, which was widely publicised by the press, Fahmy was represented as a tyrannical Oriental, a sexual predator and sadist. As these characterisations intersected with widespread stereotypes of Oriental cultures, Fahmy was constructed as a villain, and Marguerite a feminine victim.⁷⁹ Bland's work is crucial for explaining how the temple's peddling of deeply embedded racial stereotypes could be believed, but Saler's differentiation between 'naïve believers' and 'ironic believers' offers important nuance to the analysis of the temple. Discerning whether the journalists were naïve believers, or ironic believers at the temple is difficult as their 'real' opinions may well have been subjugated in favour of the newspaper's sensationalist agenda. However, it seems that for the journalists at the cheaper newspapers, unlike the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, Hilditch's temple achieved a certain level of authenticity for them to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves – perhaps with ironic distance – in what was claimed to be a Chinese temple.

The civic dignitaries' involvement may have helped create the illusion of reality, or at least respectability, necessary for facilitating ironic belief. All the accounts mention the dignitaries' presence and some repeated Lever's remark that the temple would enable visitors 'to appreciate something of the emotional and psychological atmosphere surrounding Chinese

⁷⁹ Lucy Bland, *Modern Women on Trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, 2013), 132-150.

temple worship'.⁸⁰ Though this could be evidence of his naïve belief due to his ignorance of Chinese religions, it is worth noting Lever's stated the temple could produce 'something' of a Chinese atmosphere. Lever also 'deplor[ed] the haste of our modern world' and spoke of the time when 'a family of Chinese craftsmen would spend sixty years perfecting a vase', which led him to admonish the 'modern craze for short cuts'.⁸¹ It is possible that Lever knew the temple was not authentically Chinese, but looked beyond this as it could still transport visitors to a less commercial, 'modern' environment, albeit an imaginary one.

Though realistic, the press understood the performative nature of the display. All the newspapers mentioned to exhibitionary purpose and referred to 'Mr. Hilditch' as if to reassure readers of his Englishness and implying that his cross-dressing had effectively reinforced this identity. By donning Chinese robes Hilditch crossed the stark boundaries of Britain and China and played with the idea of British identity at a time when the Chinese presence in Britain was an explosive issue. Chinese links to the drug related deaths of actress Billie Carleton and dancer Freda Kempton, and the trial of Brilliant Chang spurred moral and national panic over the Chinese corruption of white girls.⁸² Baron Gruner, the villain in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client' (1924), demonstrates how intimacy with Chinese objects could subvert moral values at this time. Gruner murdered his wife and was influential in many other acts of violence, and his wickedness is symbolised in by his intimate relationship with his China collection. In the story Watson claims Gruner's 'face was swarthy, almost Oriental, with large, dark, languorous eyes'.⁸³ In contrast, the journalists' framing of the temple suggests that Hilditch had made the exhibition real enough without crossing the line of respectability.

⁸⁰ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'The Morning Post, 15 February 1926', 32.

⁸¹ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'Manchester Guardian, 13 February 1926', 37-38.

⁸² Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law and the Chinese Puzzle in Imperial Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009), 123-158.

⁸³ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client', *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (London, 2004), 11-43.

Coverage of the temple in the national press shows how it was considered newsworthy across the cultural hierarchy and how the national papers' regurgitation of local press stories led to the spread of unverified reports. *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* repeated Hilditch and Lever's aims for the temple, the *Illustrated London News*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Graphic* referred to it as a 'replica' and the *Morning Post* an 'exact replica'.⁸⁴ *Answers* magazine went as far as to argue that 'very fine examples of Chinese art may be seen in the London museums', but the 'idea of exhibiting a collection of this kind in a setting which reproduces not only the details but the atmosphere of a Chinese temple is new'.⁸⁵ Choosing to compare the temple to museum displays rather than the commercial exhibitions and fairs, suggests Hilditch's attempts to root the temple in museum culture had paid off. Indeed, the *Telegraph's* article inspired a brief account of the temple in *The Museums Journal*, which referred to it as a 'Chinese Palace Temple Museum'.⁸⁶ *The Museums Journal* was a periodical aimed at spurring conversations over the governance and purpose of Britain's museums, and during this time debates over the professionalisation of museum displays were frequent.⁸⁷ There was no critical review of the temple in *The Museums Journal*, thus its authenticity was not scrutinised. Instead, the mention in the journal shows how a broad, uncertain definition of museum exhibitions existed in the 1920s and how this was in part due to the intersection of non-specialist and specialist media.

Hilditch delivered ceremonies at the temple until his death in 1930, and in January that year claimed that 'no fewer than 162,009 people' had visited the temple, and there were a further '34,000' on the waiting list, but as with his claims to the temple's authenticity, there is good reason to distrust his testimony. An article in the *Yorkshire Evening Post* indicates that members of the Leeds Old Student Association planned to attend a service in early 1930,

⁸⁴ CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 2, 'The Daily Telegraph, 15 February 1926', 'The Times, 15 February 1926', 'The Morning Post, 13 February 1926', 'Daily Graphic, 13 February 1926', 'Daily Mirror, 13 February 1926', 29, 34, 38-41; *Illustrated London News*, 20 February 1926, 338.

⁸⁵ *Answers*, 20 March 1926, 4.

⁸⁶ *The Museums Journal*, 25 (1926), 274.

⁸⁷ MacLeod, *Museum Architecture*, 81.

suggesting that it continued to draw in audiences and even had a reach outside Manchester.⁸⁸ The fact University educated people intended to visit suggests that the temple was not, despite the dominant sensationalist press coverage, entirely a lowbrow affair. That said, the exact motivation behind their visit and their response is unknown.

Tellingly the Manchester Art Gallery Committee, who Hilditch had wrangled with over his collection, negated the motion of visiting the temple. The Committee considered Hilditch a ‘humbug and a pest’, and seemingly knew the temple was a fabrication. Besides, the temple’s premise – to show art in an ‘actual’ setting – would have clashed with the Committee’s modern, educational ideal for exhibitions, whether real or fake.⁸⁹ Not all Art Gallery Committees were so dismissive, however. The *City News* noted that a group of Leigh Councillors visited the temple in March 1928. The Councillors visited at a time when they were borrowing Hilditch’s objects for an exhibition, and probably went as a way of thanks. Only the Mayor’s comment that they were ‘very glad to find ourselves out alive’ was recorded by the paper, and though we can read into this too much, it seems he did not take the ceremony seriously.⁹⁰

Hilditch gathered visitor responses to his exhibitions, including two on the temple, and compiled them at the back of his exhibition catalogues. These sources are the closest we can get to ordinary visitor opinions, but we must treat these sources with caution as it is possible he wrote the comments, or shaped responses by asking certain questions. ‘Ahmed Loutfi’, supposedly from Cairo described the temple as ‘A truly wonderful experience of Chinese Art and atmosphere’. It is possible that ‘Loutfi’ did not actually exist, or make this comment, but if legitimate it does imply a faith in the temple’s authenticity. ‘F. Maisie Moorhouse’ stated

To pass through the strangeness of the ceremony, to see so many ancient and surprisingly lovely crafts; to think one’s own thoughts and to dream one’s own dreams about them without having to express admirations, criticisms, astonishments – or be obliged to listen to other people’s opinions, has been an experience which I truly appreciate and shall never forget.⁹¹

⁸⁸ *The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 8 January 1930, 6.

⁸⁹ MCL/GB127 Council Minutes/Art Galleries Committee/12 ‘Meeting March 1926’, 140; *Crewe Chronicle*, 3 July 1930, 10.

⁹⁰ Article printed in Hilditch, *Illustrated Catalogue of a Chinese Exhibition* [Leigh], 70-71.

⁹¹ Hilditch, *Illustrated Catalogue of a Chinese Exhibition* [Leigh], 62-63, 75.

‘Moorhouses’ address is listed as Rusholme and according to the 1911 Census there was a schoolgirl named ‘Florence May Moorhouse’, who lived there with her aunt, a dressmaker, and great aunt.⁹² If the same person, Moorhouse would have been twenty-three when she visited the temple, but we know little else of her background. The comment suggests the temple was strange, but not scary, and its value lay in its encouragement of personal reflection on the objects based on imagination rather than public statements of connoisseurship. It suggests that the temple had a ready audience of those who wanted enchantment and felt alienated by the formal art galleries’ push for academic readings of art.

Conclusion

The Hilditch-McGill Chinese Palace Temple was constructed at a time when museums were responding to the challenge posed by mass commercial culture. The cinema, theatre and commercial exhibitions offered audiences new types of spectacles and fed the increasing demand for realism. Previous studies have argued that exhibitions of art at museums and galleries, including those of Chinese art, were framed in antagonism to these sensationalist forms of mass media. Art was displayed in a decontextualised setting, encouraging aesthetic contemplation. However, this essay has shown an alternative relationship between art, museums and sensory effects. Existing outside the elite museum network, Hilditch created an immersive atmosphere that enabled a more participatory engagement with art. Combining sensory and scientific realist styles, and by repeating well-established stereotypes of China’s exoticism, Hilditch was able to make persuasive claims to the temple’s authenticity within a British context, which thereby underlined the temple’s educational value and aligned it to museum culture. This article suggests that although the highbrows may have understood their museums and engagement with China as superior to the lowbrows, the faith placed in the

⁹² *Census Return for England and Wales, 1911*, class RG14, piece 23772, schedule number 21 <www.findmypast.co.uk> [Accessed 14 November 2021].

authenticity of Hilditch's temple, by both ironic and naïve believers, demonstrates that the demarcations on this hierarchy were more blurred than previously assumed. The temple shows that art exhibitions and mass culture could be unlikely bedfellows and provokes us to adopt a broader definition of museums in the 1920s. This is significant for our understanding of high and low culture in the interwar period more generally, as it calls into question the stability of these categories.

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