The Charles and Mary Lamb Journal

No. 1, Summer 2024 (*CLB New Series* No. 179)

'Let us cultivate the Elian spirit of friendliness and humour'

PUBLISHED BY
THE CHARLES LAMB SOCIETY

An Elian Bicentenary

Charles Lamb, letter to Bernard Barton, 15 May, 1824.

Blake is a real name, I assure you, and a most extraordinary man, if he be still living. He is the Robert [William] Blake, whose wild designs accompany a splendid folio edition of the "Night Thoughts" which you may have seen, in one of which he pictures the parting of soul and body by a solid mass of human form floating off, God knows how, from a lumpish mass (fac Simile to itself) left behind on the dying bed. He paints in water colours marvellous strange pictures, visions of his brain, which he asserts that he has seen. They have great merit. He has seen the old Welsh bards on Snowdon—he has seen the Beautifullest, the strongest, and the Ugliest Man, left alone from the Massacre of the Britons by the Romans, and has painted them from memory (I have seen his paintings), and asserts them to be as good as the figures of Raphael and Angelo, but not better, as they had precisely the same retro-visions and prophetic visions with themself [himself]. The painters in oil (which he will have it that neither of them practised) he affirms to have been the ruin of art, and affirms that all the while he was engaged in his Water paintings, Titian was disturbing him, Titian, the Ill Genius of Oil Painting. His Pictures—one in particular, the Canterbury Pilgrims (far above Stothard's)—have great merit, but hard, dry, yet with grace. He has written a Catalogue of them with a most spirited criticism on Chaucer, but mystical and full of Vision. His poems have been sold hitherto only in Manuscript. I never read them; but a friend at my desire procured the "Sweep Song." There is one to a tiger, which I have heard recited, beginning—

> "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright,
> Thro' the desarts of the night,"

which is glorious, but, alas! I have not the book; for the man is flown, whither I know not—to Hades or a Mad House. But I must look on him as one of the most extraordinary persons of the age.

Front cover images of Charles and Mary Lamb are taken from the William MacDonald edition of the *Works of Charles and Mary Lamb* (London: Dent, 1903-1908).

The Charles and Mary Lamb Journal

The Journal of the Charles Lamb Society

No. 1 (n.s. 179) Summer 2024

Editor: John Gardner

Reviews Editor: John Gilroy

CONTENTS

SERENA QIHUI PEI on *China from the Ruins of Athens and Rome: Classics, Sinology, and Romanticism 1793-1938* by Chris Murray

CHRIS MURRAY, *China from the Ruins of Athens and Rome: Classics, Sinology, and Romanticism 1793-1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). £83 hardback. ISBN: 9780198767015

In *China from the Ruins of Athens and Rome: Classics, Sinology, and Romanticism 1793-1938*, Chris Murray offers us new ways to think about the nexus between Classics, Sinology and Romanticism. Focusing on how Graeco-Roman antiquity informs the Anglophone literary engagements with China, Murray examines a comprehensive scope of texts: Macartney Embassy narratives, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Charles Lamb's 'A Dissertation upon Roast Pig', John Keats's *Lamia* and W.B. Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli', etc. He argues that classical culture could constitute a lens through which Anglophone thinkers perceived China.

The book is structured chronologically with focus on the period from the Macartney Embassy in 1793 to the end of the second Opium War in 1860. Chapter One begins with Thomas Stothard's frontispiece in *An Historical Account of the Embassy to the Emperor of China*, where Stothard embellishes Macartney's vision of China with Graeco-Roman motifs including three cupids and a woman with Greek headband. In addition, during Macartney's meeting with the emperor, interpreters were speaking Latin; thus, Murray proposes that 'Latin was the medium through which Macartney's delegates could communicate with their interpreters; they accessed China via Graeco-Roman culture' (7). Chapter Two assesses the parallels between the declines of the Roman Empire and the Yuan Dynasty implied in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' and Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall*. Kubla Khan decreed a pleasure dome, and for Gibbon, it was at this moment that Kubla Khan fell, because in the same sense of moving into a palace rather than living in their traditional tents, the Mongolian rulers consumed the same Chinese luxuries (i.e. Chinese tea and silk) that Gibbon considers to have corrupted the Romans. Murray explores an echo between 'the late eighteenth-century trade deficit caused primarily by Britain's thirst for Chinese tea', and Gibbon's observation that 'the Eastern Roman

Empire was "drained" by the demand for Chinese silk' (57). Thus, on reading Gibbon, Coleridge juxtaposes the fate of the Khan's dynasty with the fortunes of the Roman Empire, as the Yuan Dynasty was weakened by territorial overexpansion too, through which, as Murray inspiringly argues, Coleridge's central point is that history could offer lessons for modern issues such as imperial expansion and Sino-British relation.

Chapter Three is inspired by the impressive coincidence between Keats's *Lamia* and the Chinese 'White Snake legend', and Murray insightfully puts forward that the lamia story associated with Apollonius of Tyana is also the origin of the Chinese 'White Snake legend'. Both of them are connected with an ancient source: Indian oral tradition – 'The King and the Lamia: The Snake Wife' and Murray further suggests that the texts 'manifest a long accretion of exchange between East and West' (71). As Keats's classical source, in Philostratus' account, prior to the lamia episode, Apollonius of Tyana visited India. Since the Hellenistic world had been aware of India since Alexander the Great, it is reasonable to think that Greek visitors to India brought back the lamia tale. In addition to testify his hypothesis that the Buddhist flavour of the White Snake story indicates that it originates in India, Murray significantly points out that Chinese readers had also heard of Apollonius, since a copy of Philostratus' text was found in a Jesuit library in Beijing in the five years before the first publication of the White Snake legend. Chapter Four studies Lamb's two essays: 'Dissertation upon Roast Pig' and 'Old China'. Murray finds out that the real source for Lamb's comical account of the Chinese discovery of cooking is not a Chinese text translated by Thomas Manning as commonly believed, but the Neoplatonist Porphyry of Tyre (234–305 CE). Likewise, although most people claim that the narrative based on the Willow motif (a story of two thwarted lovers being transformed into doves) is an ancient Chinese tale, Murray suggests that the actual source for the narratives in the Willow pattern is *Metamorphoses*. Meanwhile, Murray argues that notwithstanding the Neoplatonic source and Orientalist vision of China, 'Dissertation upon Roast Pig', for instance, is 'a work of English wit above all' (131). He refers to the remarkable evidence that 'Roast Pig' was reprinted in a Taiwanese university English textbook in 1939, as Lamb foretold that his work did spread to a distant corner of Asia. Despite the contemporary fashion in British consumerism, Murray also indicates the decline of the popularity of Chinese aesthetics, which evolved in a broader change in attitudes toward China during Lamb's lifetime.

This tendency became clearer in Tennyson's and De Quincey's works. Chapter Five examines Tennyson's exploration of China in a complex political circumstance by 'displacing contemporary controversies to a mythical past' (148). In 'The Lotos-Eaters', via reimagining the classic subject in the world of Homer, Tennyson (and later Sara Coleridge)

contemplated on the current opium crisis which was intensified by their families' experiences of addiction. Tennyson articulated an increasing sympathy for China, and Murray maintains that 'Homer's lotus-eaters episode lends itself to contemplation of the Chinese opium trade by its narcotics, naval theme, and encounter with the Other' (152). Moreover, in 'The Ancient Sage', Tennyson responded to the Daoist masterpiece: *Dao De Jing*; Murray notably argues that his reading of *Dao De Jing* inspires his reconsideration on the subjects such as time, progress, and inaction. However, there is a lack of a comprehensive discussion where Murray compares the binarity between *tian* and *di* with its counterpart in the distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*: he regards *tian* as 'a set of processes', whereas considers *di* as 'material Earth' (165). But in Chapter 7 of *Dao De Jing*, for example, it's recorded that *tian chang di jiu* (天長地久) which implies that, unlike the difference between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, both *tian* and *di* are constantly 'processing'[1] infinitely.

With less sympathy, De Quincey's Sinophobia at the dawn of the second Opium War is the focus of Chapter Six. Murray closely investigates the passages on 'a Malay' in his *Confessions* and puts forward that De Quincey regards his command of classics as a source of authority. By quoting from the *Iliad*, Murray thinks that De Quincey refers to the Trojan War, which is 'the archetypal European narrative' (182) of West encountering with East, and Murray further impressively argues that 'the beautiful servant becomes Helen in need of rescue from an exogenous enemy' (183). In addition, on the word 'a-muck'(amok), Murray illustrates that, for De Quincey, the Malay amok recalls the 'daimonic agency of Greek tragedy' (191). And for De Quincey, the Qing official's destruction on the opium shipments, suggested by Murray, is 'a similar gesture to his disposal of his opium supply in the hands of the Malay, a futile attempt to avert destiny. In this tragic schematic plot the Opium Wars are inevitable' (192). However, despite his warmongering rhetoric, Murray believes that De Quincey did not really want war. Chapter Seven focuses on the period during the second Opium War, when *Yuanmingyuan* (the Summer Palace) was looted by British and French soldiers in 1860. Then both Britain and France experienced a kind of national identity-crisis arising from international discussion, exemplified by Hugo's comment that he hoped the Summer Palace artefacts could be returned to China. Furthermore, Murray proposes that the removal of treasures from *Yuanmingyuan* caused a repatriation debate that has been interwoven with the Parthenon

[1] The word is translated by myself from the Classical Chinese *sheng* (生), according to Chen Guying's interpretation of the part '以其不自生' in Chapter 7, where he considers *sheng* as *yunzuo* (運作).

Sculptures controversy. Meanwhile, the fall of the Summer Palace stimulates further conversations over barbarism and civilization.

As a coda, the last chapter explores Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli', an ekphrastic account of an artistic stone which is engraved with a poem in traditional Chinese that is attributed to the Qianlong Emperor. Murray argues that Yeats's account of the lapis lazuli encapsulates his thoughts on Daoism, particularly on *Zhuangzi,* as he coded the Daoist notion of inaction (*wuwei* 無為) into the word 'gaiety'. In the poem, Yeats considers the real world as a stage, and indicates that the real-life actors should act in the sense of in a play, because 'the cycles of historic change are as inevitable as the passing acts of a play' (230). As Yeats read in Plotinus' *Enneads*, the death and life for people are just like actors taking on new roles, which enormously echoes with Zhuangzi's idea. In the aftermath of the Qing Dynasty's collapse, Murray maintains that Daoism provides Yeats with the confidence for optimism. Although, just like the notion of inaction, gaiety is not a response to the tragic action itself but is nevertheless a wise detachment. Therefore, Yeats regarded the stone as material evidence of 'a universal wisdom' (223) and Murray insightfully suggests that certain boundaries between classics and China have been dissolved in a search of the proper response to the catastrophe – they co-exist in a global context of a shared cultural heritage.

Serena Qihui Pei
University College London