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Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900–40

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Abstract

Few parts of London attracted so much attention as did Limehouse between the Great War and the 1930s. In popular novels, films, hit records and sensationalist newspaper reports, Limehouse (and its ghostly double ‘Chinatown’) figured as one of the most exciting and dangerous places in

Britain. This article explores the Chinese presence in Limehouse and the ways in which it was represented. It utilizes census and other kinds of data to attempt an assessment of the numbers of Chinese in the district, numbers which were often inflated by contemporaries. It then looks at the ways in which a fantasy Chinatown of opium dens, dangerous Chinese underworld masterminds, and suborned white girls was projected on to the district. And finally it looks at how the evident discrepancy between exotic fantasy and drab reality was negotiated in contemporary representations of Limehouse.

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