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Humanities and Theology

# **From China to England**

**A comparison between Lao She's *ErMa* and travel writings by travellers to  
China and Europe during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

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## Abstract

This essay is focusing on the Chinese author Lao She's work *ErMa*, a novel that is about two Chinese who move to England in the beginning of the twentieth century. In the novel there are plenty of cultural differences and prejudices between the English and the Chinese. This essay will focus on these and compare them with real, non-fictional travel writings written by travellers to China and Europe during the beginning of the twentieth century. This is done in order to determine if the majority of the prejudices in *ErMa* are only made up by Lao She's imagination or if they are based on reality.

## 论文摘要

本文主要探讨中国作家老舍的小说作品《二马》，主要描述两位中国人在二十世纪初客居英国的生活与遭遇，包括了许多中国人和英国人相互之间所存在的文化差异与偏见。本文将针对《二马》中所描绘的文化差异与偏见，与二十世纪初到过中国和欧洲旅行者所著作的非小说类作品进行比较，以判断这些文化差异与偏见是来自于老舍个人写作的想像，还是在当时可能是真实存在的。

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## Introduction

When travelling to China, either as a tourist, student or teacher, you are often overwhelmed by the cultural differences. For a Swede it is different to eat everything with chopsticks, and some dishes you are served are containing what you previously, and evidently wrongly, thought were inedible ingredients. Moreover, if you have smiling Chinese surrounding you, there is no other way than to simply do your best and eat. When asking for directions in China, it could happen that the person you asked has no idea, but instead of admitting it and risk losing face, he points you in a likely direction. Or the classical art of bargaining: if you play your cards right, you should be informed that this is the shop keeper's only livelihood, you are trying to insult him by saying this price and you are called a friend during the whole discussion. These cultural differences are the main reasons to why *ErMa* caught my attention, because how is it the other way around? When Chinese come to England or Sweden for example?

Lao She's *ErMa* was first published in 1929 and is a humoristic novel about two Chinese who move to London in the early twentieth century. The novel is brimming with serious as well as ridiculous prejudices and cultural differences between the Chinese and the English, but it is often clear that the humour is simply used to lighten up the truth. There are evidently many prejudices and cultural differences between the Chinese and the English. But what are they? And are these only products of the author's imagination or are there other, non-fictional, travel writers from the beginning of the twentieth century who say the same? These are the main questions in this essay.

The main characters in *ErMa* are the two Chinese, Mr Ma and his son Ma Wei. They are travelling from China to London in England to take over an antique shop, which was previously owned by Mr Ma's recently departed brother. The missionary Reverend Ely lives in London and has met Mr Ma and Ma Wei in China beforehand.<sup>1</sup> He manages to arrange a place for them to stay in London and after their arrival he shows them around. Their slightly unwilling landlady, who later grows fond of them, is Mrs Wedderburn. She has a daughter named Mary and they together with Mr Ma and Ma Wei share an apartment. The antique shop is run by Mr Ma's late brother's assistant, Mr Li, who is a Chinese well-versed in the English

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<sup>1</sup> All the English names of the characters in the novel are taken from the Penguin Books' edition of *Mr Ma and Son*, because I felt reluctant to "make up/guess" suitable names for the characters.

<sup>2</sup> The translations in this essay are my own.

way and manners. He becomes Ma Wei's friend and sometime adviser in how to survive in this foreign country. Other characters mentioned in this essay are Reverend Ely's wife Mrs Ely and their two children Catherine and Paul. While the daughter is a friend to Ma Wei, the son hates the Chinese. Their uncle Alexander is also commented on, along with brief encounters with shop owners, waitresses and an aunt who only communicates by letters.

My essay is divided into different parts. The first one is an introductory part where prejudice and other terminology are briefly explained; followed by a short part on the author of *ErMa*, Lao She, and his time in London. After these comes the main part of the essay, namely a selection of all the prejudices I encountered in *ErMa*, divided into categories. In all of these categories, notes and observations from non-fictional contemporary travel writers are mixed with the ones from *ErMa*, either confirming or contradicting the prejudices from the novel. Finally comes the conclusion where I will do my best to answer the questions asked in this introduction.

## Prejudice and Terminology

“Prejudice” is a term for judging a person or view, without proper knowledge of the subject. Prejudices are not uncommon since everyone has prejudices about more or less everything, but what often is forgotten is the fact that the term itself does not only have a negative meaning. In *A Dictionary of Sociology*, the term is defined as “preconceived opinion or bias, against or in favour of, a person or thing” (“Prejudice”). It is therefore fair to draw the conclusion that prejudices are present in everyone’s mind, but if they are mainly positive or negative is probably individual.

To have prejudices is often regarded as something negative, but without prejudices we would probably not be able to move forward. They are an essential part of who we are, but the important thing to keep in mind is to acknowledge their limits and how to overcome or, in some cases, confirm them. To believe that every Chinese is dangerous and no one should ever “visit that blasted country” is a prejudice, just as much as to believe that China has to be “an exciting country” to travel to. In both cases someone or something is judged, but a prejudice can thus harm or, to an equal extent, help when encouraging or discouraging a person to travel to China.

There are of course a clear difference between a cultural difference and a prejudice. Cultural differences are all around us and wherever we go, since every country has its own customs, habits and peculiarities. Therefore, cultural differences cannot be considered to be something negative or positive, since they are vital parts of any country. Prejudices, on the other hand, are opinions or ideas that often reflect feelings or ignorance. Prejudices are often based on cultural differences, but while cultural differences simply exist, prejudices are created.

While working with Lao She’s *ErMa*, or with other non-fictional travel writings, a troublesome part is to distinguish between a prejudice and a simple keen observation. It is important to point out that the prejudices which are presented in this essay, are only a fraction of what is possible to find and analyse, but everyone does not find the same prejudice or consider the same things to be odd. What may seem to definitely be a prejudice for one person might be perceived as a complete truth or merely an observation from another’s point of view.

In Lao She’s *ErMa*, there are, in this writer’s personal perception, a lot of prejudices. The majority of those that are expressed by the characters directly often tend to be of the negative kind. Mr Ma is a middle-aged Chinese travelling to London, and he is full of

prejudices against the English. His counterpart in the novel is Mrs Wedderburn, a middle-aged English lady who has an equal amount of prejudices against the Chinese. They are both on a comical level representing the other's prejudices, and on a smaller scale are they representing prejudices between the English and the Chinese. The twist in the novel is that they are gradually falling in love and are thus gradually starting to perceive each other in a better light. Several scholars have pointed out that expressing prejudice against other groups is also a way of putting your own group above the others. By degrading someone else, you make yourself appear in a better light (Jennings, 2).

In the Chinese language there are two common ways of translating the term prejudice. The first one is *pianjian* (偏见) and the second one is *chengjian* (成见). This could be confusing, because when you look up prejudice in *Oxford Chinese Dictionary* both of these options are available ("Prejudice"). If you look them up the other way around, from Chinese to English however, there is a slight difference. *Pianjian* then means bias and *chengjian* means prejudice. These terms are definitely very close to each other, but if you compare the two words in *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, the following descriptions are given: "Bias: a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others that usually results in treating some people unfairly" ("Bias"). And "Prejudice: an unfair feeling of dislike for a person or group because of race, sex, religion, etc. *or* a feeling of like or dislike for someone or something especially when it is not reasonable or logical" ("Prejudice"). It can thus be possible to draw the conclusion that *pianjian* is slightly softer than *chengjian*, since the definition for bias at least does not have any "dislike" in its definition.

## Lao She and London at the time

The author of *ErMa* is Lao She, which is a pseudonym for Shu Qingchun. He was born in Beijing, China in 1899 and died in the same city 1966. He was the author of many humorous and satiric novels and short stories, as well as a number of propagandistic plays written later in his career. Besides writing, he also worked as a teacher, principal and district supervisor and travelled both to England and the United States during his lifetime ("Lao She").

In 1923 Lao She started to attend English classes, and it was through these that he got in touch with the Christian missionaries in China (Witchard 31). In 1924, Lao She got

an invitation to teach Chinese, a five-year long position at the University of London, which he accepted. He was recommended for the post by an English reverend that had met Lao She during one of his trips to China (33-34). Lao She thus taught Chinese for five years at School of Oriental Studies, University of London, where the students mostly were missionaries and businessmen preparing for overseas work (Auerbach, "Placing China" 54).

It was during these years that *ErMa* was created, and it was finished in 1929, but interestingly enough it was not until 1980 that an English translation was published (55). Sascha Auerbach argued that *ErMa* is quite unique as a novel written at that time, in the aspect that it was a direct commentary on Chinese life in London, with the perspective from an author with the experience of both living in China and England ("Placing China" 54). It is also expressing critique towards both of the cultures and prejudices both the English and the Chinese have (56). *ErMa* is filled with possible topics to study more deeply, but this essay is focusing on the "everyday-life-prejudices", the ones that the common people, or the characters in the novel, share and discuss. Lao She is in *ErMa*, among other things, putting a great deal of emphasis on how China is a weak country in comparison to England, due to the lack of a proper military force et cetera, but this will not be discussed in this essay since this is the author's own opinion and not one expressed by one of the characters.

The London Lao She was living in had during recent years experienced a multitude of changing attitudes towards China and the Chinese. Fairly few Chinese had been living in London since the late eighteenth century, but it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century they started to get the public's attention. The reasons were both the politicians growing fear of the Chinese spreading their devious opium-habits, as well as that people started to notice the social and moral problems that had developed in this part of town, the East End, where the Chinese lived (38).

At the beginning of the twentieth century the East End's opium danger had lost some of its news value as a public scandal, but instead the Chinese merchants was starting to be noticed and written about. They were not as dangerous as the opium dealers, but they were still worth investigating, because they could lure innocent English women into becoming their wives (42). It is during this time period the events in *ErMa* are taking place.

It is almost impossible to know what the Chinese immigrants in London really felt and how they reacted to all these prejudices, because according to Auerbach, there are extremely few sources available representing the Chinese point of view. Only a handful of published letters have survived to our days, and it is unclear if there ever existed any other records written from an immigrant angle ("Placing China" 43).



## Food, Beverages and Restaurants

“世界上除了英国人, 谁能吃这么好的早饭?”

“Who in the world can make such great breakfast like the English?” (Lao She 110)<sup>2</sup>

Food is a central aspect of every culture and is therefore easy to compare to your own customs and habits. In *ErMa*, food is discussed from time to time, and it is a good example of one of the major cultural differences between the English and the Chinese. When Reverend Ely first asks the landlady Mrs Wedderburn if she could let two Chinese stay with her, she expresses a deep concern over the Chinese's preference for cooking rats. She will not allow anything of the sort in her home (16). Mrs Wedderburn and her daughter Mary later on have an argument about whether the Chinese eat dogs or not (80). Mrs Wedderburn has spoken to Mr Ma and maintains that the Chinese in fact do not eat dogs, but her daughter is equally convinced of the opposite and neither of them manages to convince the other. In an article written by a Swedish traveller in China, the author tells his readers how the Chinese not only eat rats, dogs and cats, which is common knowledge, but also frogs, snakes and worms may become part of the meal (Brand 5). This knowledge made him feel a hint of reluctance when he was invited to a restaurant in China, but when asking his host which of the dishes contained cat or dog, he was surprised when he was reassured that all the dishes contained only pork, beef, chicken and fish, and nothing inedible (5-6).

Isabella L. Bird is an English traveller in China and, according to Ross G. Forman, she argues that it is extremely hard to change this view on the Chinese cuisine. Many people in England and Europe are utterly convinced that all Chinese eat rats, dogs and snakes frequently. This is however due to the fact that this is all they read about China, because the majority of journalists who travel to China and report back home have only attended great banquets there, where the host wants to impress his foreign guests. The journalists have not seen or tasted the food the average Chinese prepare and eat in their everyday life (Kerr, Kuehn 63).

When it comes to the Chinese's habit of eating rice in *ErMa*, the reverend's wife Mrs Ely expresses during a dinner a prejudice by firmly stating that all Chinese love rice, in any form (Lao She 83). Which forces Mr Ma and his son Ma Wei politely, slightly blue in the

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<sup>2</sup> The translations in this essay are my own.

face and with great difficulty to swallow the milky, sweet rice they are served (87). After several months spent in London Mr Ma has developed a method for dealing with the food differences: “给我什么吃什么吧, 不必问!” (174). It may be translated as “I’ll eat whatever they give me, without questions!”.

There are divided opinions in the novel about the Chinese way of drinking tea. Mrs Wedderburn is impressed with the Chinese’s knowledge of the beverage (37), while the general opinion amongst the English is that drinking tea without milk is an impossible, chocking or ridiculously amusing thought (193-194). The English drink a lot of tea and therefore consider themselves to have a great knowledge about the beverage, as George Orwell explains in his article *A Nice Cup of Tea*: “... tea is one of the main stays of civilization in this country...” (Orwell 1). Bird says, according to Forman, that during the nineteenth century from the Englishmen’s point of view, tea was transformed from something foreign and odd into something domestic and familiar. Chinese food on the other hand, was continuing to be regarded as something foreign and completely inedible, not to mention the barbaric fact that the Chinese eat with chopsticks instead of normal cutlery (Kerr, Kuehn 65). Similar opinions are expressed in *ErMa* about the Chinese’s use of chopsticks and, of course, the Chinese cuisine’s lack of potatoes accompanying every meal (Lao She 194).

The English themselves could also be considered to have some peculiar eating habits. George Wingrove Cooke says, according to Forman, that the English should not judge and refuse the Chinese food merely based on the fact that their own fathers and grandfathers had not eaten it. He argues further that some English eat a lot of mussels, from which you often can get sick, and therefore they have no right to judge another country’s food habits since they at least do not affect your health (Kerr, Kuehn 68). From Mr Ma’s point of view, the English definitely have some peculiar habits. The first time he is served cold meat for lunch he is slightly shocked over the concept of a completely cold meal (Lao She 46). There are also comments in the novel about the English preference for beef, the most peculiar one being made by a doctor who recommends immigrants to eat beef, because that was the reason the English soldiers won the war (21). According to Forman, the English traveller Archibald John Little uses humour and an ironic tone to describe an English dinner with Chinese people he had in China. It shows how the Chinese view English food, and the description is far from flattering, since the food is described as: “... unadorned, undercooked and shockingly rude in its serving method” (Kerr, Kuehn 69).

K’ang Yu Wei, a Chinese traveller who travels to Sweden, comments on Sweden and the Swedish cuisine. He is truly impressed by the country in general and finds the

Swedish cuisine to be unique, in a positive way, but cannot at all understand why Swedish doctors have not yet prohibited the health hazardous custom of eating raw fish at every occasion (K'ang Yu Wei 10, 24). He draws the conclusion that it has not yet been forbidden because it is so deeply intertwined with the Swedes' long history of being fishermen, and the raw fish is probably easy to digest, even if it has hazardous effects on your health (65).<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese restaurants in London have few Chinese guests. This is partly because the food is, more often than not, more English than genuinely Chinese. Additionally, in *ErMa*, the waitresses treat the Chinese customers with little or no respect (Lao She 192). Ma Wei's friend, Mr Li, explains for Ma Wei that the English and Chinese differ when it comes to preferred restaurant standards. The English prefer to spend the restaurant's money on the sanitation of the restaurant and quality of the ingredients, rather than on the taste and flavour of the food. The Chinese, however, care little for the sanitary and do not mind if their surroundings are filthy as long as the food tastes good (65). Bird agrees with this statement and says that excellent food is often prepared under the most unsavoury conditions in China (Kerr, Kuehn 64). The focus on the food itself is also commented on in Crambe's article (Brand 9). When the guests at a dinner in China have finished the meal, more food is coming in, with the only existing reason for this being to show that there is plenty of more food in the house.

## Marriage, love and women

“好看的得养活着,不好看的也得养活着,一样的养活着,为什么不来个好看的呢”

“Beautiful wives need to be provided for, ugly wives also need to be provided for, since both need to be provided for, why not marry a beautiful one?” These are Mr Ma's thoughts on marriage (Lao She 19).

Love and marriage, as well as intercultural marriage, are frequently discussed in *ErMa*. Both Mr Ma and his son Ma Wei are falling in love with English women and each of them are therefore experiencing first hand some of the cultural differences and prejudices

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<sup>3</sup> K'ang Yu Wei also draws the conclusion that the main reason to why Sweden does not have a great population growth, is because the cold climate probably stops the sexual desire drive from working properly (63).

between the Chinese and the English. Mr Ma and Mrs Wedderburn, their landlady, are gradually falling in love with each other.

When the love is starting to show they both deny their affection for each other, but they have different reasons to do so. Mr Ma thinks a lot of his honour, which is rather ironical since he himself has no professional career or even the best of reputations in his hometown. According to Mr Ma, if he were to marry a foreigner he can never show his face again and, additionally, it is disgraceful to marry a widow (149, 145). But when Mr Ma tries to see things from Mrs Wedderburn's point of view, he cannot understand why she would object to him being a Chinese, since they are such a refined people (213). Mrs Wedderburn on the other hand thinks more about society's rules and how the English people are unjust because they have an acceptance of English men taking foreign wives, but they look down upon English women falling for foreign men (222).

Mrs Wedderburn's worry should be seen as authentic: Sascha Auerbach describes in her article the situation for English women falling for Chinese in London in the beginning of the twentieth century, and she completely agrees with the fictional Mrs Wedderburn. Auerbach is, for example, talking about a real Chinese opium dealer's wife. She was once a respectable English woman, but years of associating with these dark Chinese had robbed her of her Englishness. As Auerbach says in her article: "She was neither English nor Chinese, but something in between ... [T]he women who associated with them [the Chinese opium dealers] usually lost their own English names in the process ..." ("Placing China" 41).

After a while Mr Ma and Mrs Wedderburn are finally admitting that they are friends, and maybe even more than that, but their dissimilar views on a relationship are clearly presented when they take a walk together (Lao She 167, 205). Mrs Wedderburn is taking the lead with Mr Ma walking behind her, and she wishes he were an Englishman so that they could hold hands. Mr Ma, however, wishes she were Chinese so that she could walk behind him instead of the other way around. At the end of their walk, they romantically completely forget about these conflicting thoughts when they smile at each other.

Mrs Wedderburn is definitely more worried than Mr Ma about how a relationship between them could affect their children. She worries what her extremely proud daughter Mary would say, and also how Mary's future would look like if she had a Chinese stepfather. It is highly probable that any suitable suitor would immediately run in the opposite direction if they found out about her mother's foreign lover (201, 221).

While Mary seems to be too concerned about her own life to notice her mother's upcoming love affair, Ma Wei certainly takes notice of the course of events between his father

and Mrs Wedderburn. He is convinced that they cannot marry, given that they have no future together and he predicts especially Mrs Wedderburn's future as miserable. If they were to marry and decided to stay in England, Mrs Wedderburn's family and friends would shun her and she would lose all her social life and status in society. If they were to move to China however, she would without doubt feel miserable there too, because she would know no one and have no knowledge of the Chinese language or culture. Moreover, Mr Ma's salary back in China barely provided for himself and Ma Wei. If Mrs Wedderburn were to live with them she would have been forced to get used to a much lower living standard. Ma Wei is thus predicting their potential marriage as a miserable one, no matter what they do (190-191).

Mr Ma's and Mrs Wedderburn's love story sadly ends before it had really begun. They admit that they love each other and would want to get married, but contrary to Mr Ma's exclamation that love is enough, Mrs Wedderburn has decided that she personally prioritizes her place in society over her growing love for Mr Ma (212, 221). She explains that the English are equal in many ways, but they do not accept love between different social classes, and definitely not between different races. She admits that her own prejudices about Mr Ma have changed, but the majority of the society still sees every Chinese as horrible persons. She reasons that they cannot get rid of, nor fight, people's prejudices, especially not racial prejudices, but at least they can be friends (221-222).

Mr Ma's son Ma Wei is also falling in love, with Mrs Wedderburn's daughter Mary, but she makes it clear from the beginning that she detests the Chinese and that Ma Wei has no chance with her at all. She is confusing him however, by agreeing to go to the movies with him and even hold hands with him at the theatre, an action that she views as harmless but for Ma Wei it means something more (124). The Chinese and the English do not always have the same social boundaries (139). Ma Wei's love slowly turns into bitterness, and he does not see any point in falling in love with a foreign woman, not for himself, nor for his father or any one else (124, 239).

Another subject discussed in *ErMa* is women's behaviour in general, especially that of English women. Often it is Mr Ma's observations or prejudices that are expressed. He is charmed by their looks, and considers English women to be an improvement over Chinese women (172). He has fallen for Mrs Wedderburn and her beautiful features, but he is also sometimes bewildered by her behaviour. He generalises and makes it a common quality of all English women, and thus complains about "their" haughtiness, physical strength and cunning ways (206, 114, 249, 213). His son Ma Wei on the other hand, has not so many general opinions, except that one should always follow the simple rule: while dealing with foreigners,

especially women, it is compulsory to compliment everything, regardless of your own opinion about it (34).

The English themselves are also commenting on the English women's behaviour. When relationships are discussed it is widely considered, as mentioned above, that the Chinese are not good enough to be with English women (198). An interesting and unexpected occurrence in the novel is when Ma Wei and the English girl Catherine are having a friendly meal together; it is actually two Chinese that in an extremely rude manner calls her a prostitute for going out with Ma Wei (196). This comment leads to a fight between Ma Wei and Catherine's brother Paul, but while the former is defending Catherine's honour, the latter is just after another opportunity to fight and a chance to put down a worthless and despicable Chinese.

## Losing Face and Manners

An important expression for the Chinese is "to lose face", or more accurately, the importance of *not* losing face. In Chinese, both *diulian* 丢脸 and *diumianzi* 丢面子 are translated as "to lose face", according to the *Oxford Chinese Dictionary* ("Diulian" "Diumianzi"). *Diu* 丢 meaning to lose, and *lian* 脸 and *mianzi* 面子 can both be translated as "face". It could be explained as an expression about pride and being able to show your face in front of relatives, friends and the world. To explain it simply: You cannot show your face if you have lost your face, therefore it is in a sense a quite logical expression. It is considered to be an extremely important expression to some Chinese. David Yau-fai Ho explains it distinctly in his article *On the Concept of Face*:

While it is not a necessity for one to strive to gain face, losing face is a serious matter which will, in varying degrees, affect one's ability to function effectively in society. Face is lost when the individual, either through his action or that of people closely related to him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies. (867)

Some even reason that as long as you have kept your face and everything seems to be fine on

the outside, the reality seldom matters (Lao She 131). Swedish travellers in China confirm this by saying that the Chinese is a proud people, but they are also saying on the other hand, that it is their pride that will be their downfall, because this fear of losing face leads to an unwillingness to change (Brand 14, 17). In *ErMa*, Mr Ma is frequently debating with himself on the right action to take in different situations, always with the importance of not losing face in mind.

In Mr Ma's opinion, rank is something very important, and the English lack a notion of it (130). His idea of a high position, something to be proud over, is to work as a government official. Various other jobs that he has had, or been offered, such as teacher, businessman or actor are all horribly below him in his own opinion. With any of these jobs he would risk losing face simply by accepting the positions (18, 20, 185). Throughout the novel he often thinks, or even expresses out loud: “我不能 ..., 给中国人丢脸”, “I can not do this .... (*because*), I will lose face on behalf of my fellow countrymen” (144). This worry of maybe embarrassing himself on behalf of the Chinese is in a way confirmed when some of the Chinese workmen in London discover that Mr Ma, in their opinion a fairly wealthy businessman, has agreed to work as an actor in a Chinese-bashing film. Their reactions are anger and loathing because he does such a disgraceful thing and he is also contributing to the Chinese's already bad reputation (247).

While speaking with foreigners, Mr Ma often retorts to what he himself considers to be safe expressions, for example “Splendid!” or “Absolutely!” in order not to offend anyone and through that risk losing face (86, 142). According to an English travel writer, the Chinese have in general a fear and respect for foreigners, which means they show an open-mindedness for their ways, but it does not necessary mean that they prefer them before their own (Kerr, Kuehn 86). When Mr Ma has conversations with his closer companions, he has trouble denying requests, because that would in his opinion be equal to losing face. Therefore, when Mr Ma and Alexander go to a bar, Mr Ma feels obliged to drink as much as his definitely more experienced companion, in order not to lose face (Lao She 106). Ironically, to lose face is exactly what he ends up doing when he passes out in the street due to an overconsumption of alcohol. His fear of losing face is also one of the reasons why he participates as an actor in the Chinese-bashing film; it would be impolite to refuse when Alexander asked him (247). Mr Ma is evidently meant to be an extreme example of the Chinese's fear of losing face, because when he gets lost on a walk, he thinks it is under his dignity to ask for directions, and even to walk closer to a street sign in order to try to find his way again is unthinkable (219).

The cultural differences between the Chinese and the English are portrayed in their views on manners and correct social behaviour. Reverend Ely explains to Mr Ma that the English shake hands when greeting someone, but if the counterpart does not want to, he or she can just simply nod instead (30). A traveller in China is interestingly confirming this particular cultural difference when he explains how he was instructed that the Chinese shake their own two hands when greeting someone, instead of using the Western way of shaking hands with the counterpart (Brand 28).

Furthermore, the English put a great deal of emphasis on good manners and the importance of being proper all the time, no matter the circumstances (Lao She 86, 118). When Ma Wei and Li later discuss cultural differences between themselves and these foreigners, Li points out another curious thing: The English view on noisiness is a bit different from the Chinese. At a dinner table, according to the English, you can blow your nose as loud as you like, but it is considered to be horrible offensive if you make the slightest slurping sound while drinking tea (66). On one occasion, an English man even informed Li during a dinner that the horrible table manners of the Chinese, such as scratching your head or burping, are one of the reasons the English send missionaries to China (66). A Swedish traveller in China agrees that the Chinese's table manners are indeed, in his opinion, very bad (Brand 6). As a guest at a dinner, you are expected to accept food put directly on your plate and you should serve others in the same manner. Furthermore, you should also throw bones and shells on the floor and abide many other peculiarities. This traveller is, however, saying that even though these customs are weird, he is quickly and without much trouble getting used to them (8).

“...天下还有比英国话再好的!” ”What finer language was there in the world than English?” a comment from Mrs Ely's point of view, which is one of the parts in *ErMa*, where the English people is described as small-minded and arrogant, and that they are feeling superior to everyone else (Lao She 83). By some peculiar reason, the French seem to be accepted as equals, as well as speaking the only other acceptable language in the world, but everyone else is below the English in status and way of thinking (83, 122). Especially the two characters Paul and Alexander clearly represents these views, but while Paul detests the filthy Chinese, Alexander has a friendlier attitude since he is merely convinced they are stupid and do not know any better. During Christmas, it is an English custom to give presents to everyone, but Paul makes a statement when he, on purpose, does not give a present to Mr Ma. Even if they have met several times and Mr Ma has a present for him, it is below Paul to give anything to a detestable Chinese (164, 165).



When it comes to Alexander, he is raised to have impeccable manners and be polite all the time, but he considers it to be a complete waste of time and energy to be polite to the Chinese, since they are too silly looking and too stupid to appreciate politeness anyway (86). A Swedish traveller is agreeing in this opinion, and he claims that the Chinese lack a notion of what is proper and good-looking, and that they have no idea what modesty is (Brand 35). Alexander is however the one who takes Mr Ma to a bar, but it is clearly only because he prefers the company of anyone instead of drinking alone, rather than wanting the specific company of Mr Ma. Alexander brags that he is the one who educated the simpleminded Chinese in the art of drinking whiskey, and along with other stories about his horrible trip to China, he entertains Mr Ma and the other guests during the evening (89, 97). Alexander is also continuously throughout *ErMa* giving his opinions about the Chinese, and he is convinced that the Chinese love to gamble, cannot drink properly and all of them are very secretive (89, 239).

Mrs Wedderburn does not share this negative view, but she solemnly accepts the fact that others have it. Therefore she refrains from inviting too many relatives over to her house, since it would not be fair to force them to mingle with Chinese (114). The few she does invite do not want to come and are shocked by the fact that she is letting them live with her (115). At the time, only certain families would allow Chinese to live in their homes and in most cases it was simply due to a desperate need for more income (13).<sup>4</sup> In Mrs Wedderburn's case it was because she needed the extra money, she thought her new Chinese tenants would be murderous and ugly, both on the inside and the outside, and she accepted reluctantly to let them stay with her (31). Her preconceived ideas about the Chinese however are rapidly changing throughout the course of events, especially when she even falls in love with Mr Ma, but she knows that her own opinions now diverge from the socially accepted ones (170). Aunt Dolly does not want to come over at Christmas, simply because she believes it to be a happy holiday, and if she would spend it with some murderous and dangerous Chinese her life would undoubtedly be under constant threat, which would definitely ruin the happy feeling of Christmas (119).

On one occasion, Mrs Wedderburn's dog has gotten lost. When it is Ma Wei who finds him, she is literally so happy to the point that she forgets that he is Chinese (120).

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<sup>4</sup> All "at the time" references in this essay are referring to the early years of the 20th century, approximately between 1890s and 1930s, if nothing else is mentioned. The events in *ErMa* are taking place after the Great War (First World War).

Feeling happier, and braver, than usual and grateful towards Ma Wei, she walks side by side with him home, and she does not care who stares (122).

Mary's opinion about the Chinese on the other hand, is following popular beliefs. She is convinced, without a doubt, that the Chinese are portrayed in novels and films as murderous and dangerous et cetera, because that is exactly the way they are in real life, why else would they be described that way? (74). This is also the reason why she screams to her mother to watch out for poison when she is about to drink a cup of tea which she has been given by her new Chinese tenants (37).

When Ma Wei and his father reveal their thoughts about the English, they too have very divergent opinions. Mr Ma often longs to move back to China and he does not seem to like the English people one bit, except for Mrs Wedderburn. He thinks the English urge for constant praise is a sign of vanity since you, in Mr Ma's point of view, always know in your own heart if something is good or not (34). Furthermore, on those few occasions when he actually wants to talk to someone else, he curses under his breath the English way of not sharing or interfering in each other's lives (142, 212). His son Ma Wei, on the other hand is, in order to deal with everything new in this foreign country, placing his faith in a famous expression fairly early in the novel, namely: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" (41). K'ang Yu Wei, the real Chinese traveller, is on the other hand impressed with the manners of the European people. When his daughter lost her umbrella in Stockholm, decorated with real gold details, they considered it to be lost forever. A few days later however, it was returned to them since someone had found it and given it to the police (K'ang Yu Wei 21).

Other Chinese travellers at the time also had prejudices about the European people's manners. One example is Sun Fuxi who was travelling to France in the 1920s. He had before departing on his journey to Europe prepared himself by learning as much as possible about the country he was about to visit, but he was surprised when many of his prejudices proved to be false. He had tried to perfect his table manners before he went, but when he was invited to stay with a family at the countryside in France he realised that their manners were not at all refined, but rather brusque and sometimes even rude. Moreover, the lady of the family did not at all fit his preconceived idea about each and every one of the French women being glamorous; she was in reality rather plain with a coarse appearance (Xiaoqun Xu 77, 78). There evidently were prejudices, both from the English's point of view as well as the Chinese's point of view, that were not applicable to everyone.

## Novels, Films and Prejudices in general

A question this essay is not dealing with, but only vaguely mentions is the following: Where do all the prejudices come from? Since this is not a main question in this essay, it will only briefly be mentioned what is written in *ErMa* on the subject. Some of the main factors for contributing to the English prejudices against the Chinese and China are novels, films and news articles. The English authors who wrote novels, plays, et cetera at the time, made the Chinese, in most cases, play the bad guys. These rumours about the Chinese being extremely cruel, was actually partly based on the stories and news articles from the not so peaceful boxer rebellion in China (Auerbach, "Placing China" 52). Chinese characters in English fiction are thus murderous, horrible creatures without manners who smoke opium all the time. Some authors base this on their own experience of meeting maybe one or two criminal Chinese in the East End slums of London, while others base it simply on rumours or even their own imagination (Lao She 13, 55).

This claim is supported by the Swedish traveller writing under the pseudonym "Mustafa", who complains about the fact that many travellers in China sometimes use their imagination to cover up for the things they do not know when talking about the country. They are comforted by the knowledge that China is such a faraway country that no one will know, or check, if what they claim is true (Brand 28). Douglas Kerr writes about another travel writer, the American journalist and Comintern agent Agnes Smedley (1892-1950). According to Kerr, Smedley says that she is always striving to rapport the truth back to her country, because her fellow countrymen have no other way to obtain the truth than to read the papers and books available. Kerr is however, explaining Smedley's methods a bit deeper, and states that the travel writer also sometimes thought that the truth needed help to get a strong message through, so she reasoned that there was nothing wrong with spicing it up a bit. She would dramatize, heighten or even make something up in order to make her point stronger and more reliable (Kerr, Kuehn 164).

In *ErMa*, when Reverend Ely tries to encourage Mr Ma do to something more with his time in England, he gives the following suggestion which gives an indication to where some of the not so reliable sources come from: "... 最好写本东西文化的比较。这个题目现在很时兴, 无论你写的对不对...". "You should write a book about the differences between East and West! This is a very popular topic nowadays, it does not matter if what you write is true or not" (Lao She 142).

According to *ErMa*, novels are quite often describing how the Chinese are always smoking opium, and in the case of Mrs Wedderburn, this is all she knows about the Chinese before actually meeting Mr Ma and Ma Wei. Prior to their arrival at her house, she indulges herself in a novel about opium, so that she will have something to talk about when they arrive (30). Furthermore, one of the conditions for them to stay at her house is that they are not allowed to smoke opium (16). This is one of the easiest house rules to follow, since contradictory to what Mrs Wedderburn believes, neither Mr Ma nor Ma Wei smoke opium. This prejudice is however, actually based on real events, according to the writer Auerbach. She states that the fear of opium-smoking, or even opium-dealing, Chinese had its peak in England at the end of the nineteenth century. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, which is the time for the events in *ErMa*, it was still a great worry for many English people ("Placing China" 42). The worry that these filthy Chinese would corrupt others and spread their low moral values, as the actually did to some poor English women, was great at the time and the rumours were even greater (53). One of the most spectacular rumours was that even the Prince of Wales himself had paid these secret Chinese dealers a visit (39).

Swedish travellers who have reported back from China are also frequently mentioning opium in their articles. The captain on Craal's boat is described as "my opium smoking captain", and in Crambe's dinner stories there is a clearly centred opium table in the restaurant (Brand 6, 24). Mustafa expresses a fear of the Chinese slowly invading Sweden, and through that they will open up new opium places everywhere (Brand 67). These contradicting observations might indicate that there were in fact many Chinese smoking opium, or at least rumours about them doing it, but not everyone did it, as for the example with Mr Ma and Ma Wei.

There were many film productions and companies at the time in England, and among them there were indeed a few which focused on the rumours and fascination of the Chinese. Auerbach writes in her book about the Birmingham director Jack Graham-Cutts's movie *Cocaine* from 1922. The plot is simple: a young naïve English woman is seduced into opium addiction by the evil Chinese ("The Chinese Puzzle" 186). A very popular fictive character at the time was *Fu Manchu*, the novel series about the evil Chinese that was first published as a serial story in a paper, but later evolved into several books as well as films (75, 186). The film that Mr Ma later on participates in is set in Shanghai. The foreign part of the city is immensely beautiful, while the part that is called "genuine Chinese" is filthy and depressing (Lao She 246). A Swedish traveller in China is however actually agreeing with this description of a town with foreign residents in China (Brand 37). He is describing the

foreign part as beautiful and the Chinese part as filthy, but in his own opinion the former is boring and lifeless while the later is full of life.

In *ErMa* it is discussed that authors and screenwriters in England, many of them at least, are perfectly aware that the Chinese are fairly good people. But if someone would try to show this in their work, critics and audiences would ridicule them because they would go against popular beliefs, which could in turn end their careers as authors or filmmakers (Lao She 246). This is supported by Sascha Auerbach, who says in her article that the Chinese do not have the means at the time to produce a response to all the negative prejudices that are written about them, and furthermore:

The production of film and literature is completely controlled by the British, and therefore both reflect the prejudices of those who create them and cater to the tastes of viewers' and readers' expectations. In a vicious cycle, film and literature also shape viewers' expectations, reinforcing the negative Chinese images ... ("Placing China" 57)

The Chinese are not so different from the English however, since they also have their own fixed preconceived ideas. For example: From a Chinese point of view, the actor playing the warlord Ts'ao Ts'ao in a classical play from the second century, will always have his face painted white (Lao She 246). White is the colour of treachery, and just as a black-faced Ts'ao Ts'ao is unimaginable for a Chinese, a Chinese being the good guy is unimaginable for an English. It is just the way it is and has always been, but hopefully not the way it always will have to be.

In *ErMa* it is stated that the English has a habit of always reading the newspaper, and most of the time the majority believes the written word and takes it as the truth (65). What is written in the newspapers is how the awful Chinese are brutally killing English soldiers in China, and how the Chinese in England are living a lawless life (38, 244). The authenticity of the papers may be questioned however, since when Mr Ma is interviewed he is quoted in the paper to have said "Me no speak" several times, even though in reality he speaks fluent English and never uses that kind of bad sentence structure (244). A Swedish traveller is arguing further that since most of the Europeans in reality know nothing about the Chinese, they tend to believe everything that is written, since that is their only source for information (Brand 28). Some of those who actually go to China on the other hand, realise that the Chinese are not so bad after all (13). The English are at the time not given any

education about China in school, everything they have learnt about this “great country in the East” comes from novels, films, newspapers and a handful of businessmen or missionaries who purposely or not give the Chinese a bad reputation (Lao She 81).

The Japanese are considered to be a tad better than the Chinese in *ErMa*, and this point of view is also confirmed by Elaine Yee Lin Ho. She claims that some travellers who had been to Japan and afterwards went to China, might consider the Japanese to be more refined, since they have sought to adapt to the Western culture, and the Chinese thus seem to be more barbaric by comparison (Kerr, Kuehn 124). In *ErMa*, an example of this point of view is shown when Mr Ma and Mrs Wedderburn are going shopping (Lao She 55). They are on a romantic quest to find a wedding ring, but everything is completely ruined by the shop assistant. He is rude and wants to shove Mr Ma headfirst through the door, but when they insist on looking at gradually better quality rings he is confused since a Chinese cannot possibly in a legal way afford those. He then apologises and says he mistook Mr Ma for Chinese, but since he clearly is Japanese they will of course get better service. When Mrs Wedderburn angrily replies that he is indeed Chinese the shop assistant is at a loss of words. When the couple leaves the store he makes sure to take mental notes of Mr Ma’s appearance, in case the police comes by later and are on a hunt for a criminal Chinese (206). This encounter drained the last drop of Mrs Wedderburn’s conviction and after this incident she declares that the wedding is off.

Some Swedish travellers are describing how horrible the Chinese are treated by the Europeans in China (Brand 49, 50). They are in some cases not even seen as human beings, merely as servants and rickshaw drivers. One of the travellers explains the unfair law enforcement system. If a Chinese and an European would get into a fight, the outcome would determine the number of dead bodies. If the Chinese killed the European, he would in turn be killed for his crimes. If the European killed the Chinese however, he would merely be fined for the murder (49). Another one of the travellers finds that being pulled by a human is revolting in the beginning of his journey, but he simply gets used to it. This is however the same man who says that God helps us if the Chinese ever become our masters (42, 47).

## Business and Money

Another discussed subject in *ErMa* is the cultural differences concerning the views on business and money. The English merchants are given a fairly depressing description in the beginning of the novel: "... 英国人作买卖和送殡是拿着一样的态度的", "The English do business in the same way they do funerals" (Lao She 22). The English characters in the novel present various points of view on money and how to earn and prioritise it. Reverend Ely is very focused on earning money and he is still doing it at a fairly old age, a fact that is beyond Mr Ma's understanding since the reverend's children are both earning good salaries (143). The reverend however, wants to use his work to enlighten the English people about what the missionaries are doing in China and thus show them that their efforts actually give some positive results. Because he knows that without positive outcomes from their missions, the English will cease to fund the trips (21, 109).

The missionaries in China are, according to a Swedish traveller, mainly educating the Chinese in language and in business (Brand 66). There is also an English writer who agrees with this and states that the missionaries in China are actually almost more helping with education and hospitals than spreading their religious beliefs to others (Kerr, Kuehn 96-97). The Chinese traveller Shouchun, who writes on his way to America, completely disagrees with this positive attitude towards the missionaries. He says that missionaries who have spent years in China, consider themselves to be China experts and therefore reason that they have earned the right to spread all that they know about the Chinese and China, which is mostly negative prejudices and rumours (Xioqun Xu 76). Reverend Ely in *ErMa* is also describing himself as a China expert who knows all there is to know about the country and its people, but he does not focus on spreading negative rumours since he truly loves the Chinese in his own way (Lao She 11).

Another important point for the English is that time equals money (Lao She 114, 207-208). Therefore everything you spend time doing must be worthwhile, either for your happiness, but most preferably for your wallet. Both Mrs Wedderburn and Mary on the other hand, do at different occasions express a wish for that someone could think of a way everyone could get rid of money (116, 154). Because much money nowadays equals happiness, and since much money is hard to come by, so is happiness.

Li and Ma Wei both admire the English way of doing business because English people are often prepared to work hard: first they gain knowledge and then they put it into

practice (53-54, 230). Li is astonished when he realises that an English man translating Chinese poetry does not do it because he finds the poems beautiful, but only because he knows he can gain some profit by selling the translations later (231). The European businessman in China is, however, according to a Swedish traveller, lazy in the aspect that he does not care about learning anything about the culture or language that surrounds him, only the minimum amount that is necessary for survival (Brand 12). When it comes to Mr Ma's points of view, he is strongly looking down on businessmen, and expressions similar to "earn some extra cash" are outright disgraceful (Lao She 20, 184). A clear example of this is Mr Ma's shock when he realises Li is serious when he says they have no teapots in the antique shop for him, the shop owner, to drink from (56). Li tries to explain that the English way of doing business is to separate business from anything personal. Business is business and you do not mix feelings, favours or family matters into it (56-57).

One interesting aspect in *ErMa* is that it is actually an Englishman who is strongly contradicting Mr Ma's view on Chinese businessmen. His name is Lord Simon, a wealthy English merchant, who is the one person in *ErMa* who believes the Chinese to be good businessmen material. He says that the Chinese have all the right qualities to excel in business, but they unfortunately often lack an understanding of modern methods (137). While studying other travel writings from Swedish travellers in China, it is clear that the majority of them agree on this view, at least partially. One says that the Chinese have a special talent for business (Brand 11). Another admires their generosity and ability to honour deals and contracts, while another marvels at the fact that they give paper gifts to their gods, which is a sign that they have realised what a waste it would be to give up truly valuable possessions (57, 60). Finally, one person is describing the Chinese as a people without imagination and he is claiming that they lack the ability to create something new, but they are extremely resourceful and quick when they can copy other people's work. The Chinese can make almost anything ten times faster and cheaper than any Western businessman (66). This author also expresses a great worry for the future. What would happen if the Chinese started inventing and becoming completely independent of other countries? If the world is not careful, the Chinese might one day dominate the world's economic market (71).



## Conclusion

Even if *ErMa* is fiction, many of the prejudices in the novel are clearly based on real existing prejudices at the time. This is a justifiably drawn conclusion from reading and studying several other travel writings, from the beginning of the twentieth century, which lack fictional elements. Furthermore, since there are not many existing historical documents that are written by the Chinese immigrants in London from the beginning of the twentieth century, Sacha Auerbach points out the true value of Lao She's *ErMa*:

In other words, [*ErMa*] as a work of fiction, though highly problematic as a source of historical information, is invaluable as an analytical lens through which to view earlier portrayals of Chinese commercial immigrants and as a cultural barometer of the changing relationships between Britain and China as cultures and nations. ("Placing China" 54)

The prejudices about food in *ErMa* are plenty and almost all of them are confirmed as actual ones by various other travellers. Some Chinese eat dogs, cats and snakes, but definitely not everyone and often not in their everyday life. Tea is a discussed beverage that, strangely enough, is at the time no longer seen as oriental and foreign, but instead a very English tradition. Furthermore, some Europeans eat cold meat for lunch and raw fish for dinner, and all these are great examples on prejudices that actually are truths: Every country has it's own peculiar eating habits. It is interesting to realise that many of these prejudices about food still live on. In the case of the Chinese, it might not be difficult to see why, since in today's Beijing one can find the food streets and get genuine Chinese food in the shape of a scorpion on a stick.

Love and marriage possibilities are central aspects in *ErMa*, since the relationship between Mr Ma and Mrs Wedderburn is constantly developing throughout the whole story. Their unfortunate love story, even though it is fictional, could probably have been an accurate one. This scenario could definitely have taken place in London in the beginning of the twentieth century, since intercultural marriage did happen, but it often ended with the English woman being shunned by her fellow countrymen and the society.

Mr Ma has a great fear of losing face, and this is confirmed by other travellers as to be a common picture of the Chinese at the time, since they are often described as a proud

people. When it comes to manners amongst the Chinese and the English, it is interesting to learn how they perceive each other. Both sides evidently find the counterpart's manners to be weird, but sometimes they are contradicting to their own prejudices about how the other person should behave.

One of the most interesting parts in *ErMa* is how novels, films and news articles sometimes are created based on imagination or lies. The most unsettling fact, however, was to realise after reading several other contemporary non fictitious works, that there were authors and screen writers, both in England and in China, who actually did not hesitate to spice up the truth or even lie in order to get attention or reach a broader audience.

Who is better at business at the time, the Chinese or the English? This question will remain unanswered because both *ErMa* and different writers across the world give divergent opinions about the matter. Some say that the Chinese are excellent businessmen, while others blame them for lacking imagination and Mr Ma himself finds the profession disgraceful. Mr Li and Ma Wei are deeply admiring the English's way of doing business, while others claim them to be lazy, merely profit seeking businessmen when doing business abroad. The thoughts on the missionaries are, on the other hand, even more diverging. Some English writers in China are very positive and say the missionaries are helping out by working with education and hospitals. The Chinese traveller Shouchun, on the other hand, sharply contradicts this view. He is not saying the missionaries did not do, or help with, these things, but he is complaining about the conviction they have about themselves as China experts, and definitely not in a positive way. The reverend in *ErMa* is also considering himself to be one of these. It is thus fair to draw the conclusion that both views are correct. The missionaries probably helped a lot, but they also wrongly considered themselves to be China experts afterwards.

Travelling and witnessing things with your own eyes are vital ingredients for better understanding and acceptance of other cultures. In *Erma*, those who have not travelled to the target of their prejudices, China or Europe for example, have a tendency to express more prejudices than others. For example Mary and Mrs Wedderburn have never visited China, and therefore they rely on the prejudices others share with them. Xiaoqun Xu agrees and argues in an article that often when you travel to another country, you can get a greater understanding of both differences and similarities between two cultures (74). And in the words of Mary Gaunt who, according to Julia Kuehn, wrote this while she was travelling in China. "Once China is recognized as truly different, that is, not as an imaginary other with its history of imaginary in the Western tradition, but as a country with its own history, and once

the desire to know the other becomes part of the desire to expand the horizon of knowledge in the West, it becomes necessary to demythologize and engage in dialogue” (Kerr, Kuehn 81). This quote explains the whole concept of negative prejudices. It confirms what has previously been said in this essay, namely that if you do not know anything about a country or its inhabitants, you tend to base your knowledge on what others tell you, regardless if you know it is true or not. As Gaunt states, there needs to be a genuine interest to learn more about the other, before myths and prejudices can be confirmed or crushed.

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