Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes
Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China
PATRICIA LAURENCE
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This is a wonderful book: beautifully designed, generously illustrated in black-and-white and color, and intelligently written. Further, Patricia Laurence, a professor of English at City College of New York, has written something quite rare in our times—an academic book of literary history and theory that an intelligent nonspecialist can read with interest and comprehension.

The title alludes to a major character in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, a painter whose way of viewing the world suggests that she is no mere Victorian lady watercolorist. Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes traces how she acquired such eyes, and how a number of Chinese writers in the first half of the 20th century learned to see the world in ways Bloomsbury figures such as Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Lytton Strachey, and Maynard Keynes, perceived it.

The result is an intriguing study of a neglected area of modern literary history and geography. The British fascination with chinoiserie, going back to at least the early 18th-century trade in tea and porcelain (and, as time went on, opium, which the British East India Company forced upon the Chinese as a way of addressing a trade imbalance), is well-known. But the interest went far beyond artifact and commodity. As the Bloomsbury community of painters, writers, and intellectuals sought new ways of coming to grips with the modern condition, an intricate web of contacts between England and China—especially Cambridge and National Wuhan University in Hubei Province—provided stimuli that ranged from the aesthetic to the erotic and which, Laurence is convinced, profoundly influenced forms of modern expression in both nations, each engaged in its own cultural transformation.

A great virtue of Laurence’s approach is her strong interest in the lives of her subjects and her narrative sense. Her first chapter, with the engaging title “Julian Bell Performing ‘Englishness’,” recounts the affair between Bell, Vanessa Bell’s son and Virginia Woolf’s nephew, and Ling Shuhua, the wife of the dean at Wuhan University where Bell taught English literature from 1935 to 1937. What could have been merely an intercultural scandal instead creatively energized not just the lovers but a number of other members of Bloomsbury and of its Chinese counterpart, the “Crescent Moon” group.

Among British writers of the period, Laurence sheds new light on Woolf, the great modern critics I.A. Richards and William Empson, Katherine Mansfield, and especially E.M. Forster, who did not write “A Passage to China” to match his great A Passage to India, though, as Laurence explains, he might have done so under only slightly different circumstances. Bloomsbury painters Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant also seem more intriguing through Laurence’s own “Chinese eyes.”

The Chinese figures in the book are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers. (The book includes an invaluable annotated list of the people described in the text.) The author is quite right in asserting that she has broken important new ground for understanding modern culture. She dramatically redefines postcolonial studies by showing how individual artists transcend the factors that make one country imperialist and another incapable of anything more than resistance. The challenges of modernity in the two countries were quite different: civil war, Japanese invasion, the communist take-over in China, the cost of two world wars and fractures in the class system, as well as threats to the status quo from every direction, in Britain. New forms of expression were called for, and to a remarkable extent given how far apart they were (a three-month voyage from Britain to China in 1900), these artists responded in a remarkable collaboration.

Ultimately, the “conversation,” as Laurence calls it, between the two cultures liberated them both with new freedoms for women (aided in Britain by the opening of tea rooms in London in the early 20th century, Laurence believes) and homosexuals, and a greater scope for individualism, which in China survived even Chairman Mao. While young Julian Bell died in the Spanish civil war shortly after leaving China, Ling Shuhua lived to be 90, writing short stories like Katherine Mansfield’s and painting exquisite scenes, both English and Chinese.

This is an attractively personal book. Laurence says she stumbled on her topic almost by accident; but after acquiring some relevant papers at a Sotheby’s auction, she spent a good bit of time in China and Bloomsbury, and wandered through Cambridge dreaming how it must have been for the Chinese students who studied there and then went home to write, paint, teach, and try to survive the half-century that followed. She has met and corresponded with many of the figures in the book, both East and West, and the illustrations have the charm of a magnificent private collection—items as varied as Ling Shuhua’s “friendship scroll,” the work of many hands and 30 years, paintings and sketches by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, even a reproduction of Grant Wood’s Daughters of the American Revolution, in which one of the austere-looking daughters holds a blue willow teacup.

REVIEWER: William T. Hamilton is a professor of English at Metropolitan State College of Denver.