Legends and Legerdemain in Nine Stories from the Celestial Empire

Joe Sample

Abstract

This article introduces an obscure collection of English-language stories about China written by a little-known author and in a popular but understudied style. Thomas Henry Sealy's *The Porcelain Tower; or, Nine Stories of China* (1841) is a book of comic prose and verse, with illustrations by John Leech, that has not received scholarly attention despite its popularity in the decade following the First Opium War (1839–1841). Although few characters in the stories are admirable, and many are barbaric, conceited and untrustworthy, *The Porcelain Tower* is important in the history of the comic vision of China and an opportunity to reconsider the range and complexity of the textual and visual presence of things Chinese in the Western literary and rhetorical imaginations early in the Victorian era.

Keywords

Thomas Henry Sealy; *The Porcelain Tower; or, Nine Stories of China*; John Leech; comic prose and verse; customs-and-manners books; *Punch*

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Legends and Legerdemain in Nine Stories from the Celestial Empire

Joe Sample

Introduction

Thomas Henry Sealy's *The Porcelain Tower; or, Nine Stories of China* has not received scholarly attention despite its popularity in the decade following the First Opium War (1839–1842). *The Porcelain Tower* was first published in London (1841) and then again in Philadelphia (1842). It was retitled and republished, first as *Chinese Legends; or, the Porcelain Tower* (1848) and then as *Broad Grins from China* (1852). The stories are a mix of comic prose and rhyming verse with illustrations by John Leech (1817–1864), whose name and signature realistic style are synonymous with *Punch* magazine. The stories have convoluted plots with both factual and fantastical elements. Five of the stories originally appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* between March and August of 1841, and thus targeted and appealed to the same urban middle-class or middlebrow readers that Brian Maidment identifies in his research of printed materials from the late Regency and early Victorian eras.[1] The retitled editions of the book include an unsigned "Memoir of the Author" who was born around 1811 and who died of consumption in 1848. The memoir states that *The Porcelain Tower* was Sealy's "best known" work and the one for "which he will be remembered," comparing him to Oliver Goldsmith and Charles Lamb ("Memoir" 1848: xi). The memoir also notes Sealy's early accomplishments as a translator of "Italian literature and poetry, ancient and modern" and acknowledges the "promise of better things" following the 1839 publication of *The Little Old Man in the Wood, Or, The Tale of a Comical Stick*, a thirty-page poem about an encounter with the last surviving forest fairy of Leigh Woods and the destruction caused by the construction of the Clifton Suspension Bridge (x). The memoir does not mention

[1] See, for example, Maidment (2013). Eileen Curran described readers of *Bentley's Miscellany* as ranging from "leisured and educated gentlemen who could appreciate the skill and the incongruity of translations into Latin of English children's verse" to the "city types…[who] might [have preferred] broad comic verse that begged to be chanted or sung" and "girls…[who] copied softer stanzas into their albums" (1999: 104).

Merelina: Or, Such Is Life (1842), an epistolary novel of more than 50 letters published the year after *The Porcelain Tower*.[2]

Despite the high praise in the memoir, Sealy and *The Porcelain Tower* are not remembered. This article brings the author and his work into the "fast-growing area of research" that considers "the Victorian encounter with China" (Granata 2024: 57), arguing that *The Porcelain Tower* played an important role in creating the comic China and Sino-satiric styles that came to be associated with the writers and illustrators of *Punch*. The character portraits and storylines in *The Porcelain Tower* demonstrate the variety and pervasiveness of China in the West at this moment in popular literature and in cultural history especially among those who had little to no experience in China or direct contact with Chinese people. Elizabeth Chang argues in *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010) that Chinese things occupied "a familiar yet exotic place in the British visual and literary universe" (3), and Ross Forman in *China in the Victorian Imagination: Empire Entwined* (2013) shows that the British "textual production of China and the Chinese" entwined the two empires, a characterisation of Anglo-Chinese relations that allows Forman to "[break] away from a top-down or centralized" theory "of imperialism and its literary production" to consider instead the ways in which discourses engaged "in a dialogue with players both internal and external to itself" (5). Chang and Forman offer examples throughout their studies of China being positioned for humorous and satirical purposes, ranging from the broad – with reference to the recurring "comedy on Chinese aesthetics" that appeared in literature across the nineteenth century (Chang 2010: 17) – to the specific – in a discussion of a satiric piece titled "Anti-Imperialism in China" (1844) in *Punch, or, The London Charivari* "in which a group of Chinese meet to express their concern about slavery in British mines, factories, and agricultural districts" (Forman 2016: 186). In *Cartooning China: Punch, Power & Politics in the Victorian Era* (2022), Amy Matthewson makes the case that *Punch* "used China as a site upon which wider anxieties of Britain's social stratification…as well as its global position as an imperial power were both shaped and negotiated" (1). In *Comic China: Representing Common Ground, 1890-1945* (2018), Wendy Gan looks at works beginning late in the nineteenth century, calling on scholars to be "alert to…comic absurdities" (7), and warning against presuming that comic imaginings of China and the Chinese "embody a haughty imperial gaze or that the humor deployed is necessarily mocking and denigrating" (8). The following reading of *The Porcelain Tower* fits into this critical framework which sees nineteenth-century popular representations of China resist what have become traditional scholarly interpretations even while repeating familiar schemes and tropes associated with the rhetoric of empire.

From "A True History" to "Original Stories": The Publishing Context of *The Porcelain Tower*

Sealy was one of a small number of individuals who took advantage of China in the news during and after the First Opium War to flex their creative wits in comic forms. The stories he wrote offer a particular variety of the imperial gaze, an absurdly, comically condescending view of the Other that relies on newfound knowledge of things Chinese. The stories contain

[2] *Merelina* appeared while Sealy was the editor of *The Western Archaeological Magazine* and around the same time he put "his genius and fortune" into a weekly newspaper, *The Great Western Advertiser*, a failed venture and a "calamity" from which "he never recovered" (x).

many elements of caricature and satire that would become familiar to readers of *Punch*, but Leech is the most direct connection between the book and the periodical.[3] His illustrations in *The Porcelain Tower* are rather unpolished compared to his European figures and scenes. The characters wear oversized and ornamented clothing copied from William Alexander's water-colour portraits from the Macartney embassy, *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814).[4] The domestic scenes include many of the "countless incidental references" that Chang identifies ("willow patterns, bound feet, and little eyes") as "scattered across domestic magazines with disparate audiences and political leanings" that helped to establish China "as a point of visual opposition to Britain" (2010: 16). The frontispiece of *The Porcelain Tower* (Figure 1) has a Chinese emperor (from the eighth story in the collection) seated on a throne surrounded by more than a dozen figures and an end mark woodcut depicts eight laughing Jack-tars tarp tossing a startled mandarin. There are 15 additional illustrations, at least one per story, all depicting dramatic moments, and all filled with "familiar yet exotic" (Chang 2010: 3) details meant to signify China and Chinese things.

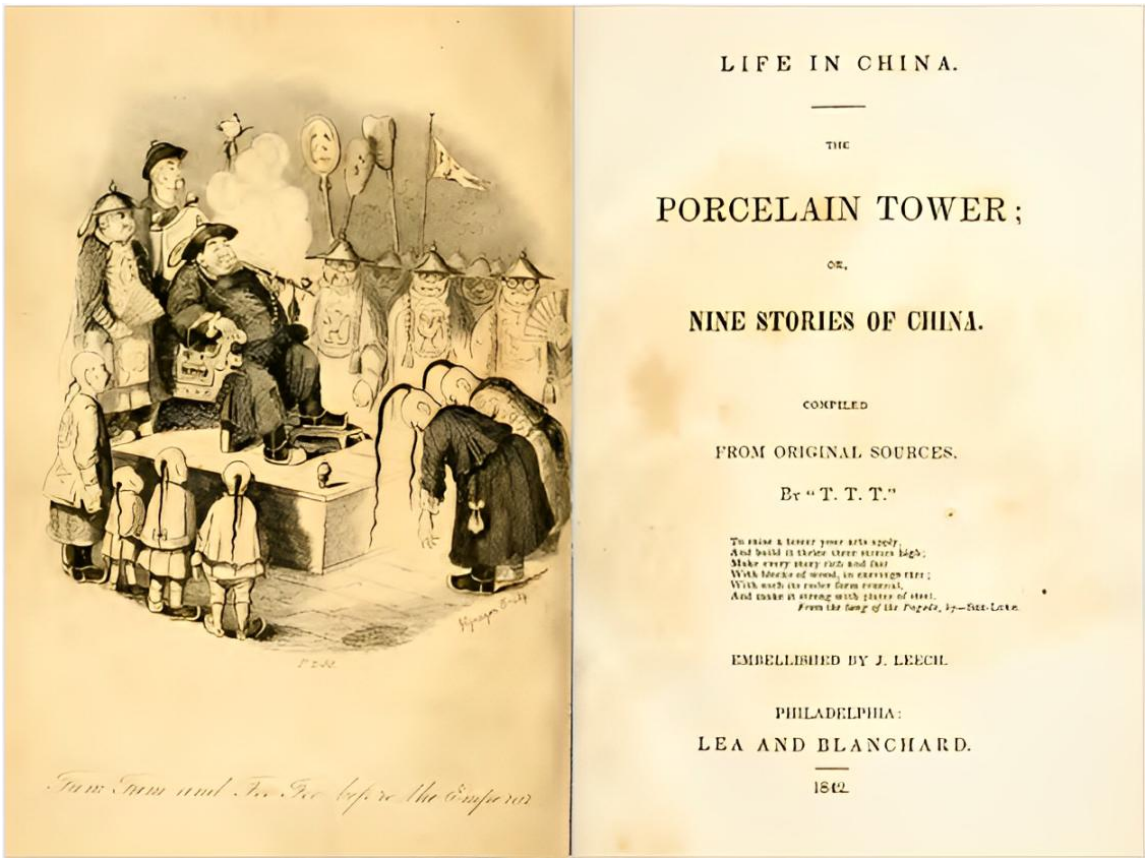

Figure 1. Frontispiece and title page of *The Porcelain Tower; or, Nine Stories of China* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1842.)
Source: Internet Archive

[3] William Thackery described Leech's work as "family-friendly entertainment" that had a "broad appeal to men, women, and children" that in turn "was crucial in securing *Punch*'s survival in a highly competitive marketplace" (Thackery cited in Miller 2009: 269).
[4] The embassy (1792–4) was the first face-to-face diplomatic meeting between a British envoy and a Chinese emperor. Led by George Macartney (1737–1806), the embassy was large and lavish but ended without the British gaining any diplomatic concessions.

A classified advertisement in *John Bull* dated August 21 announced that "Mr. Bentley" would publish *The Porcelain Tower* "during the present month" ("Mr. Bentley Will Publish" 1841: 407). Albert Richard Smith's "Important News from China. Arrival of the Overland Mail," the first of many articles about China in *Punch*, appeared one week later. The article included a small illustration of a mandarin and a Jack-tar by Leech. *The Porcelain Tower,* together with the articles and illustrations appearing in *Punch*, brought forth the second wave of nineteenth-century English-language comic writings about China, following a first wave that arose in response to the Macartney embassy.[5] The second wave was influenced by Mark Lemon (1809–1870), who co-founded and served as the first editor (along with Henry Mayhew) of *Punch* and who in 1838 wrote a satirical essay for *Bentley's Miscellany* titled "A True History of the Celebrated Wedgewood [sic] Hieroglyph, Commonly Called the Willow Pattern" (1838). "A True History" recounts the legend of the Chinese origin of the popular willow pattern on blue and white porcelainware. The pattern was in fact British in origin with no small debt to Greek mythology. Lemon used China as a setting to display his wit, a rhetorical move with a long history in the Western literary and artistic encounter with China and Chinese things.

Sealy uses the same tactics as Lemon, only to a much greater extent. The stories in *The Porcelain Tower* resemble "A True History" in the way China is exoticised. Personal names for instance are written to sound strange and include rhyming and repetition. "A True History" has characters named Sing-sing, Ti-di, and Tri-tri, while in the first story of *The Porcelain Tower* alone, the Emperor Ho-Ho, his father Ha-Ha, and his son He-He all live in the city of Din Din. The set up of "A True History" is a "new doctrine" from the Chinese emperor that declared that death was "no longer a thing of terror" but something that "every child of the sun" should "look forward to with joyous anticipation" (Lemon 1838: 61), an erudite-sounding fabrication that positions the Chinese (East) as opposite to the British (West). One sentence in the story includes an asterisk that leads to a note with a wordplay and a quote about flowers symbolising love "in the East" (64). Some of the stories in *The Porcelain Tower* have similar set ups based on Chinese cultural beliefs and all of them have notes, often with direct quotes (including page numbers) from books such as Alexander's *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814), John Francis Davis's *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants* (1836), and Walter Henry Medhurst's *China: Its State and Prospects* (1838).

Beyond such customs-and-manners books, though, for writers such as Lemon and Sealy there were few established archetypes or roles played in English-language literature about the Chinese that they could draw on to tell their stories. This meant that behind the unfamiliar institutional and cultural practices, landscapes with bridges and pagodas, and stories set in temples or the emperor's bedroom, most of the characters and scenarios in *The Porcelain Tower* are recognisably western stock: quackery in medicine and faith ("The Porcelain Bath"), contemptible and temptable entrepreneurs ("Marriage in a Mask"), community ritual and folly ("The Feast of Lanterns"), palace intrigue and avarice ("Fashions in Feet"; "The Emperor Hwang-de"), competition and unrequited love ("The Student of Hanlan"), among others. Several other elements are not so specific to China that they cannot be read ironically, such as the pedant whose comically large eyeglasses mark him as intellectually distinguished or the go-between who tricks people on both sides of a deal. The characters in the stories can also be complex in unexpected ways, particularly the women, who violate rules of propriety, outsmart their husbands, slaughter invading armies and commit adultery – and that is just in the first four stories. In the fifth story the emperor's wife nearly ruins the palace before meeting a cruel fate, boiling to death in a bath of "cocoa-nut milk and

[5] See the appendix titled "Satires Inspired by the Macartney Embassy" in Williams (2013: 107).

high-scented cinnamon waters" sprinkled with "roseleaves" (Sealy 1841: 144), a colourful description in a cautionary tale about avarice that claims to tell the legend of the famous Jingdezhen kiln in southern China.

Challenging the Depiction of China in *The Porcelain Tower*

Although there are other lessons readers could take away from the stories, such as the dangers of opium and the perils of unfettered desires, the moralities in the narratives are of secondary scholarly significance to the role the collection played in the history of the comic vision of China in the nineteenth century and, more importantly, to the "vernacular energy" in the stories themselves (Maidment 2018: 66). *The Porcelain Tower* is filled with unpleasant characterisations but to focus on those is to miss the appeal of the learned allusions, the rhyme schemes, and the plot twists. Sealy, for example, borrows from Greek mythology and Shakespeare, and he even quotes Dante in one of the stories. More important, Sealy relies on a pose of faux expertise and displays a tongue-in-cheek wit that would become common in *Punch*, beginning with the title, a play on the famed porcelain pagoda (or tower) in Nanjing that, like the book, had nine levels or stories. His "Invocation to the Muse of Tea" before the list of illustrations compares the potency of tea to "Castalia's river," includes a Chinese point of view in referring to Great Britain as the "barbarian isles," and anticipates a favourite theme in *Punch* – the power of tea to "make our poets warm, our prosemen nervous" (Sealy 1841: vii).

The stories in *The Porcelain Tower* are in fact informed by the most comprehensive English-language works available at the time (the summaries below indicate some of his sources). In the preface, Sealy explained that *The Porcelain Tower* was a response to "recent events" related to "the politest of all people" who "had never before excited" interest "among dwellers in the West" (ix). Readers, of course, knew that China had long excited interest in the West and that the reference to "recent events" understated the reality of a war that had lasted for three years. Sealy then sketched the more concerning outcomes of what he characterised as a sudden and surprising outbreak of war (despite months of discussions in Parliament) using a similar snark, referencing deaths "of our countrymen," more deaths "of our brethren in the East," and more expensive tea (ix). The sentence has false sentiment or a bait-and-switch structure that would appear often in *Punch*. The seriousness with which Sealy expresses a "general anxiety to know something of the character and resources" of the Chinese similarly dissipates when he describes the British military fleet sent to China as comprising "two-cock boats and a walnut shell" (ix). In addition, knowing the "character" of the people is a very different undertaking compared to the enterprise of knowing their "resources" (ix).

Sealy's rhetorical winking at the reader in the preface (as well as on the title page and the dedication page that states the stories are of "REAL CHINA") is a variety of legerdemain that appears again and again in *The Porcelain Tower*, such as in the introduction where he claims he "scrupulously adhered to the…narratives" and "the characters" in the stories from their "brethren in the pigtailed East" (x), but also in the first-page footnotes and the introductory passages that preface many of the stories. Sealy relies on, but also spoofs, the "detailed accounts of the country and its peculiar people" that "have lately been poured in" and left bookstores "almost converted into China shops" (x). According to Sealy, those "tomes" were suited for libraries but "too heavy for the drawing-room or boudoir" (x). He equates the books to furniture and implies that they were meant to be displayed but not used or looked at but not read. *The Porcelain Tower* was both portable and readable as the stories included "refinements" missed

by readers of more serious works who too often judged the Chinese by the "gravity of their attire" (x). Sealy, in contrast, presented the Chinese "in a livelier dress" made of "real Chinese materials" (x), more metaphorical pokes directed at the writers and readers of those weighty and serious books.

The remainder of this article summarises each of the nine stories in *The Porcelain Tower* to discover the inventory of ideas about China that would become commonplace in *Punch* and elsewhere in comic writings about things Chinese. Unlike appearances of China in *Punch*, the stories in *The Porcelain Tower* were not tied to the weekly news cycle, making them a unique variety of nineteenth-century popular fiction that through the broad comedy of Chinese aesthetics both reinforced prejudices and found common ground in empires contrasted and entwined. Some storylines lack obvious levity or comicality or express brutishly xenophobic views. Those elements are part of the comic tradition that scholars should at least be open to considering as more than the dismissive imaginings of an imperialist way of viewing a distant and different other. The stories are also part of a long Western literary and cultural tradition of looking to China for inspiration and reflection. To be sure, the inventiveness in these stories must be read alongside the extraordinary violence as exemplified in the narrative and visual jokes involving the braids that Han Chinese men wore to symbolise their (compelled) loyalty to the ruling Manchu government. One illustration, for instance, shows a husband with his braid rigid to express his alarm, a description that also appears in the first sentence of "A True History." There, "nearly all the pigtails in the Celestial Empire" were "'bolt upright'" at the news of a new doctrine on metempsychosis issued by the emperor (Lemon 61). In the first story in *The Porcelain Tower* a husband's rigid braid expresses his surprise when he realises that his wife tricked him into drinking poison intended for her. He is later seen hanging from a wooden beam by his braid, a fate that echoes the one suffered by a young man shown tied to a tree by his braid. Another character is swung around and nearly killed by his braid and one smokes his own braid in the service of a very forced wordplay.

Such depictions speak to the challenge of interpreting comic representations of China. The views are xenophobic but also absurd: one character, a government minister caught in an affair, for example, somehow chokes himself to death using his own braid. The details degrade Chinese culture - the braids were called "pigtails" and not the more accurate "ponytails" - but they also raise the presence of China in the collective English conscience. Shaved heads with braided queues on men and tiny feet on women were visual and narrative playthings easily replicated in countless variations and situations. They may have resonances of animality in specific instances – Chinese men are also often depicted with long fingernails – but to focus on such troubling details scattered throughout the stories is contradictorily both necessary and risks sidelining broader comic disparities: a little-known writer without expertise wrote stories about China that are both informed and ridiculous. Likewise, *The Porcelain Tower* became part of Bentley's Railway Series (also called Bentley's Shilling Series), inexpensive books sold in railway stations and suitable for reading on trains. Who read the stories beyond rail passengers and why are questions that are hard to answer. Did relatively uneducated readers understand the cultural references and literary allusions, and why would relatively educated readers find crude depictions so appealing, if in fact they did? Thus, in addition to the inventory of ideas, the following summaries are also intended to discover some of the appeal of the Western imaginative and rhetorical encounter with China as found in these stories.

Pagodas and Pigtails in the British Literary Landscape

The first story in the collection is typical of the others in many ways: brute, convoluted, and replete with cultural details and comic descriptions. So-Sli is the prettiest maiden in the province of Kiang-Si ("more graceful than the bamboo, and fairer than rice") whose beauty Sealy describes in bizarre terms by comparing her features to, among other things, a river bird's tail feathers (eyebrows), a black spider's web (hair), and pink caterpillars (lips) that the "cooks of Pecheli" prepare for the "Son of Heaven" (Sealy 1841: 1-2).[6] He cites George Tradescant Lay's discussion of Chinese women in "'China As It Is'" (1841), getting the title of the book wrong but still peppering his story with other details that show his learning.[7] So-Sli's father, Poo-Poo, is a "sage and a philanthropist" who wants to find a mandarin for her to marry (3). Poo-Poo had an unhappy marriage with his late wife and held the unorthodox view that women should meet and approve of their future husbands prior to their wedding day. So-Sli meets with but rejects all would-be suitors introduced by her father as well as those who corresponded by letter. Ho-Fi is unemployed, but of a family from an imperial line, albeit from hundreds of years prior. He receives a small stipend and two sacks of rice a month as a very distant son of the then Son of Heaven. Learning of Poo-Poo's efforts, he schemes to befriend him in order to meet and charm his daughter. Ho-Fi plans a chance encounter with Poo-Poo at the market where he haggles with a butcher to help Poo-Poo procure a better-quality cut of a polecat hindquarter. They begin to chat, and the conversation progresses to So-Sli. Ho-Fi flatters Poo-Poo using excessively complimentary language, a technique that appears in other stories, especially the last one, "The Feast of Lanterns." He praises his "theorem" on marriage, gains his trust, wins So-Sli's heart, marries her, and then schemes to kill her – poisoned tea, venomous snake bite, dog attack – to get to the "particularly fortunate number" of seven "'to make up a set'" of cremation urns; his six previous wives had all died "within a few weeks after their union" (8). Learning of his scheme, the emperor orders Ho-Fi to be brutally executed. So-Sli escapes each murder attempt, but she too is ordered to be strangled by the emperor, and Poo-Poo is forced to wear a wooden collar "for his heretical doctrines" (43).

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the common perception of the Chinese as "admired for their art or their morals" had already started to give way to views that "castigated" them "as amoral, pitiless, inscrutable liars" (Peak 2015: 431). Middlebrow readers may have (rightly) viewed the characters in "Ho-Fi" as pitiless and the emperor as despotic, but they just as likely found common ground in antiquated rules of courtship, or in character portraits of superstitious fools or sages whose unorthodox teachings society rejected as eccentric. There is an absurdity as well in the initial conversation between Ho-Fi and Poo-Poo that launches the scheme. The dialogue progresses from polecats to weasels to rats then dogs, pigs, fair country women, and finally, to So-Sli. The story contains cultural details about Chinese things such as clothing that marked people as kin to the emperor, the propitiousness associated with certain numbers and creatures, and the elevated language of respect and flattery. Sealy also plays with the essay form by including a display quote of comic verse at the top of the first page along with a footnote about the author that reads as an inside joke and self-reference to the "ill fortune" that "militated against" the writer becoming famous for his "genius and industry" (Sealy 1841: 1).

[6] "Pecheli" is one of several early spellings of the Gulf of Bohai, the terminus of the Great Wall of China. The "Son of Heaven" refers to the Chinese emperor.

[7] The correct title is *The Chinese as They Are: Their Moral, Social, and Literary Character; A New Analysis of their Principal Arts and Sciences*.

Every story in *The Porcelain Tower* has a similar blend of historical and fictional details as well as faux authenticity in the framing of the narrative and in the storylines and illustrations. Only one story is based on a real figure from history, "Kublai Khan; or the Siege of Kinsai," the second story in the book which begins with a two-page introduction in which Sealy describes the narrative as a "psychological curiosity" that may have been "'the stuff' of a dream" given its "dislocation of historical facts" (45). The story is told in poetic verse with a linear structure that builds to a conclusion that is surprising yet also feels inevitable. "Kublai Khan" is filled with violence, including an illustration of "a lady with little remorse," who carries the severed heads of at least sixteen Tartar warriors tied together by their braids "in pair o'er the neck of her horse" (56). According to Sealy's introduction, the first canto is based on historical accounts of the Tartar (Mongol) ruler, but the second and third cantos are "altogether fictitious" and "a medley of legends and historical facts" as told by an ostensibly well-known (but unnamed) "warrior bard" (46).[8] According to Sealy's retelling, an emperor flees the capital after he learns that the fearsome Khan was preparing an attack. The emperor's army, his empress and twenty wives, and "his guard" – "a regimen of ladies, all chosen and pick'd / Whose hearts were brave, whose discipline strict" – are left to defend themselves (50). War commences, and Tartar prisoners are hanged daily in the town square, although the guards spare the more handsome ones. Khan, furious at the loss of so many warriors, prepares an assault, but the emperor's guards, led by the empress and dressed in their finest silks and jewels, parade outside their fortress and so beguile Khan that he instructs his troops to take the city but spare the women, whom he decides to keep as his "share of the booty" (59). He leads the charge but gets so far out ahead of his army that he "dashe[s] through the gate" / "very proud and elate" only to realise he has been tricked when the guards close the palace door and trap him inside (60). As Khan is paraded through the hallways to meet with the empress, he is delighted to see so many beautiful women. They in turn view him with his "eyes so red and his beard so yellow" to be a "very delectable fellow" (63). The empress orders Khan hanged for his crimes ("You've cut off the heads of our aged sires / You've spoiled our cities and fields with fires"), but after he compliments her, she agrees to allow him to choose his own means of death (64). He chooses to fight her soldiers, whom he easily defeats, bowing respectfully to the ladies as he beats three, then seven, then nine, then "tens and dozens" at a time (70). He refuses, though, to fight the women, and requests instead that they "match in love and not in strife" (71). The "Queen and her beautiful ladies" love the "warrior-craft" and the "crafty warrior" and they blame "the Emperor's flight" for having "kindled their spite" (71). The empress agrees to Khan's request, and he "dance[s] them by fours, by tens, and by scores." He has "conquered in love whom he couldn't in fight" (71).

[8] Sealy includes an asterisk in the paragraph and the words "*Chinese Miscellany*" at the bottom of the second page of the introduction, presumably a reference Robert Morrison's *Chinese Miscellany; Consisting of Original Extracts from Chinese Authors, in the Native Character; with Translations and Philological Remarks* (1825). He does not include this work in the notes at the end of the book.

56 THE PORCELAIN TOWER.

The handsome ones won on the Empress's pity,
The plain ones were hung in the crescents and squares.
She offered rewards for the heads of the lords,
And the commoners too of the Tartar hordes.
And her soldiers oft brought them by twos and by twos,
Slung over their shoulders so tied by their queues;*
Or, sometimes a lady with little remorse,
Arranged them in pairs o'er the neck of her horse.

* See note, H.

Figure 2. Text and illustration from "Kublai Khan." The note connects the illustration to "a narrative published by a person named Glasspoole" (Sealy 1841: 293) that first appeared in George Wilkinson's *Sketches of Chinese Customs and Manners in 1811–12* (1814). The story was later published in *Mr. Glasspoole and the Chinese Pirates* (1935).
Source: HathiTrust Digital Library

"Kublai Khan" has four notes including one that asserts "the whole of the Chinese military tactics are *as absurd as they are ridiculous*" (312, emphasis in original), citing descriptions that appear in both Lay and in Alexander, and illustrating one way in which ideas about China (and their antiquated and inept military, in this instance) circulated in society. Leech also revised and recycled illustrations from *The Porcelain Tower* (including one from "Kublai Khan") and used them again in *Punch* and elsewhere. Oddly, though, a dramatic illustration of the bloviated Chinese emperor in the next story, "Fashions in Feet; or the Tale of the Beautiful To-To," appears only in the posthumous editions of *The Porcelain Tower*. If the emperor in "Ho-Fi" is ruthless and in "Kublai Khan" cowardly, then the emperor in "Fashions in Feet" is simply not very smart. He allows his minister, Hum, to make most state decisions for him in informal meetings that the emperor's wife also attends. Hum is so able to explain matters of policy and decorum to the empress that the emperor places him in an apartment near his own residence and employs Hum "to instil" in his wife "a proper sense of all the duties she should aim at fulfilling as a woman and a wife" (76). One evening, in a fantasy-like sequence, a mosquito pesters the emperor and warns him that his wife is prone to sleepwalking:

> There's a Hum in his bed (chee, chee,)
> At the end of the gallery, (chee,)
> Best cut off his head, (chee, chee,)
> Or at least his salary (chee).
>
> (80)

The emperor opens his eyes to find the empress getting out of bed slowly. She moves as quietly as a fly, and he follows as quietly as a spider, concerned that she might fall down the stairs or out of the window. Just as she is about to enter Hum's room the emperor saves her from making a misstep. He guides her back to the room and ties her to the bed. The next morning, he asks if she remembers anything, and she lies about a dream that casts her rescuer (the emperor) as a black dragon. That lie leads to another lie and then, she "put the thing in a more philosophical light," and attributes her noctambulism to her large feet that had "not a proper proportion of exercise during the day" (86). The emperor orders his wife's feet chopped with a cleaver – hence, the origin of bound feet – and then seeks out Hum for "a private conference" (89). But when messengers get to Hum's apartment, they discover that he has choked himself to death using his own braid.

"Fashions in Feet" seems an excuse for Sealy to engage in pun and innuendo, combining comical and disquieting (to Westerners) features of Chinese culture (braids, bound feet) into one tale. The next story also has forbidden romance and unusual suicides in a tale about another familiar feature of Chinese culture with which his readers were well acquainted: tea. Sealy introduces "Hyson and Bohea" as a "somewhat free translation" of the "most pathetic" episode in "the great national poem of the Chinese" (91). In fact the story is *Romeo and Juliet* broadly sketched, set in China, and narrated in comic verse: rival families, first loves, betrayal, betrothal, suicides, and two families that bury their differences after they bury their children together. Hyson and Bohea secretly court for months. Bohea confesses her love to a confidant, who it turns out, also desires Hyson. The confidant lets others know of a planned evening meet up, and on that fateful night, the fathers catch their children by their hair just before they embrace: "Their bliss was balk'd, their hearts were fill'd with doubt." / "Their heads were hurt, and both shriek'd loudly out" (97). Punishments are swift. Bohea's hands are cuffed, and she is tied to a post by her long hair. She is denied rice and her pipe and locked in her room, "until she vow'd she ne'er would do so more" (97). Hyson is strapped to a tree by his queue and

beaten with a bamboo switch used to thresh rice as depicted in an illustration. Their lives end when Bohea drowns herself in a large ornamental teapot used to advertise her father's business and Hyson impales himself on a whittled tea tree stump.

The forbidden lovers in "A True History" die in a murder-suicide and are, according to Lemon, "transformed into those emblems of love and gentleness" (1838: 65) – i.e., the airborne birds in the willow plate pattern. Hyson and Bohea are granted a similar symbolic longevity together, indebted, though, not to a Chinese legend but to Greek mythology. After their deaths, Hyson and Bohea's fathers put aside their differences, bury their children in a common tomb shaped like a teapot, and plant a hyson and a bohea tea tree on either side. The trees grow together, and the tomb becomes a place where lovers meet to "Kneel by the grave, or lift their hands above / To pluck the sprigs as talismans of love" (106). The tomb in the final scene in "Hyson and Bohea" calls to mind the final resting place of the young priestess of Aphrodite, Hero, and her lover Leander, both of whom die and are buried locked in an embrace in a lover's tomb. Lemon at one point describes the young woman, Si-So, in "A True History" as "like another Hero" and refers to her love interest, Ting-a-ting, as Si-So's "celestial Leander (in a boat)," adding the parenthetical because Ting-a-ting, unlike Leander, is able to use a boat to transverse the body of water that separates the couples in both stories (63). Leander in contrast tries to swim to Hero but drowns. Thus, Sealy's "Hyson and Bohea" owes its plot to Shakespeare but its conclusion to Greek mythology by way of "A True History."

Sealy further grounds his story in a Chinese context by citing Davis who explains that Chinese couples "have been known to commit suicide together, with a view to *becoming man and wife in the next world*" (Davis cited in Sealy 1841: 295, emphasis in original). The same work by Davis also supplies the legendary basis of the next story by way of a letter written by the French priest who (according to Sealy) "gave a pretty correct account of the origin of the god of the furnaces," but who left out of his account the "deified youth" and the "Empress," whose lives Sealy duly recounts in "The Porcelain Bath" (296).[9] The story also ends in a violent death but begins as a funny romance between a "beautiful young lady," Tou-Këen, who had "just arrived at marriageable age" (115-116), and a young civil mandarin, Si-Long, who is dispatched by the emperor to summon Tou-Këen's father, Nu-Moun, a "celebrated physician" with "extensive" knowledge of "astrological lore" (108). Nu-Moun is needed at the capital because the emperor is "seized with a sudden sickness" (108) that court physicians are unable to diagnose or cure. When Si-Long arrives at Nu-Moun's house his horse startles at the sudden appearance of Nu-Moun and bucks Si-Long off, leaving him injured and unable to return to the capital immediately. So he stays at the physician's house to recover, while the physician goes to the capital without him. The romance between Tou-Këen and Si-Long begins with glimpses and glances around the screens that separate their rooms and through concerned and curious inquiries about each other's well-being via the house staff. They fall in love. Si-Long recovers and returns to the capital knowing that Tou-Këen will soon join him at the capital and in matrimony. Nu-Moun returns, having moved the emperor off the "sick-list…by placing him on the bills of mortality" (120), and Tou-Këen then goes to the capital along with all women of marriable age. The new emperor selects Tou-Këen to be his wife. Si-Long becames enraged and declares "that Tou-Këen [is] falsehood itself" (125). Tou-Këen learns of the comments and has Si-Long beaten and expelled from the capital. Si-Long wanders back to Nu-Moun's house. He decides to drown himself in their goldfish pond but takes a nap first, dreams of a prophecy and a magic coin, finds the coin in his hand when he awakes, and then follows the prophecy from his dream. Meanwhile, Tou-Këen earns fame within and beyond the palace walls for her expensive tastes and unpleasant demeanour. She orders the reputable King-te-chin

[9] The priest, François Xavier d'Entrecolles (1664–1741), wrote letters about porcelain manufacturing techniques he learned at the Jingdezhen kiln that were republished in numerous works.

(Jingdezhen) kiln to build her an impossibly large porcelain bath. The kiln just happens to employ a young man of extraordinary talent named Si-Long who, unbeknownst to everyone, possesses a coin that "ma[kes] hard things easy for him" (138). Si-Long helps build an enormous furnace and completes the porcelain bath, but during the final firing he accidentally drops the coin into the bath. In despair he jumps into the furnace and kills himself. Thus, he is baked into the bath which connects the story to a legend of the kilns. Tou-Këen laughs when she learns of Si-Long's death as she surrounds her new bath with the "choicest fruits and flowers, and cages with the most gorgeous birds…a rare sort of water-lily, and with strange and beautiful fish" (144). While bathing she notices a slight crack in the bath that leads to the edge of a coin. She rubs the coin, and "The Porcelain Bath" ends with a cruel comeuppance: "in the very bath in which Si-Long had been roasted, Tou-Këen had been stewed" (146).

"The Porcelain Bath" has many humorous lines, even during the moments when Tou-Këen dies, and despite the morbid ending – the emperor uses Tou-Këen's skin to make a purse for himself – certain choices suggest that the emperor was coyly empathetic. He does not punish the staff for Tou-Keen's death, for example , and he declares that Si-Long should "thenceforth be worshipped as the god of the furnaces" (147). In the poem that follows, a legendary emperor, like Tou-Këen, also immerses himself in riches. Unlike her, though, the emperor in "The Emperor Hwang-te" is depicted as having learned his lesson about excessive wants. Moreover, the text claims that his story became the basis for a "still-existing custom" (149) in which the emperor and empress show they are humble and industrious.[10] According to the poem, the emperor lives by modest means but, given his status, "His soul was sad with griefs untold / He pined for wealth of gems and gold" (150). The next two stanzas describe everyday items made of rare and precious materials and then begins the emperor's journey to discover wealth in "a gloomy glen" with "spots" that "were thick with graves / The rest with viperous pits and caves" (151). The description has Gothic undertones and becomes more foreboding the deeper the emperor travels into the glen in search of a "Magician" (152) who would take him to a supernatural land of riches. He finally arrives at a cavern shaped like a skull:

> There, throned on a fragment of blue decay,
> Within the fungi's grumous shade,
> With bloodless flesh of a greeny grey,
> And in worm-eaten sepulcher cloths arrayed,
> The Enchanter sat, with a ghastly grin,
> While fanning himself with a dragon's fin,
> And smoking the flabbiest leaves he could cull,
> Through a stork's leg-bone and a badger's skull.
>
> (153)

The magician-enchanter warns the emperor that the journey to the underworld will be arduous, but the emperor is not deterred. More than a dozen eight-line stanzas of thick description in rhyming verse document their journey and eventual arrival. The magician-enchanter leaves the emperor to wander around the fantastic world by himself (for six more stanzas). He decides to go to sleep so that he might dream of even more riches, before realising that "a bed and pillow of precious stones, / Give very poor rest to aching bones" (164). He pines "for the homely

[10] Sealy quotes James Holman's *Travels in China* (1840) to explain the importance of the emperor in China's history, but he then attributes his even "more detailed account" of the custom to "Hum-Drum, the moralist, poet, and historian" (1841: 149), which was Sealy's way of admitting that he made up most of the story.

mattress he left at home" (164). After more wandering and discovering many otherworldly "goodliest things" (165), the emperor hungers "for a pot-full of rice" (166). The magician-enchanter reappears, finds the emperor starving, and offers him a chance to return to the "upper world" (168). The emperor awakes in his bed and learns he was found by his serfs "at the mouth of the Wizard's Glen" and "stiff with death-cold cramp" (169). They saved his life, and he vows to set a brave example "by following the plough" while the empress teaches others to "make raiment and beds" and feed "fat silk-worms and [wind] their threads" (169), a tradition that Sealy (quoting from Medhurst's *State and Prospects of China* in an endnote) reported had since been repeated once a year.

"The Emperor Hwang-te" uses Chinese folklore but has little in the way of humour as the story thrives on descriptive excess in a timeless down-and-back journey of self-discovery. The next story is the opposite in every way, a comedy of deceit and deception: "Marriage in a Mask; or the Cunning Shaver, Chin" is at the outset topical and includes literary diversions throughout. The main character, a barber (aptly) surnamed Chin, is not introduced until the bottom of the seventh page. Chin is "a gem of razordom" with a "head" that is "a perfect library of entertaining knowledge" and "a reading-room of magazines and newspapers" (178). Following a diversion about bribing judges to earn a "larger slice of justice" (181), the story begins in earnest when a second character named Ou-Rang-Ou-Tang shares a secret with Chin and asks (and pays) for his counsel. Ou-Rang-Ou-Tang confesses his love for the beautiful Si-Hoo-See, but she "abhors" (183) him, and in any case, she loves another, Long-Ku, who loves her in return. Chin agrees to work as a go-between and devises a scheme to deceive Si-Hoo-See into marrying Ou-Rang-Ou-Tang, who fails to mention to Chin that Si-Hoo-See is an heiress to a fortune. He also fails to mention that he has already schemed with Si-Hoo-See's uncle and parental guardian, No-Gho, to get a cut of the fortune after their marriage. Self-dealings, double crossings, and multiple payoffs result in a "matrimonial quadrille" (195) and the most complex storyline in the collection. Following digressions into Greek mythology, Dante, poetry, song, and Tradescant Lay, the story concludes with a surprise double wedding: Ou-Rang-Ou-Tang impersonates Long-Ku but ends up marrying Win-Fu, No-Gho's ill-tempered daughter, and Si-Hoo-See marries Long-Ku, who is disguised as Ou-Rang-Ou-Tang. No-Gho misses out on the drama because he had celebrated with too much drink and was put to bed early, while Chin comes away both well compensated and richer in reputation.

In writing "Marriage in a Mask," Sealy was opportunistic. The marriage quadrille plot was likely borrowed given the note at the beginning that informed readers that "several points of resemblance" were "discoverable" between the story and an unnamed "Chinese romance" (171). The opening includes a discussion about knowing a person's profession by observing their behaviour and drifts so far from China that Sealy notes he is "off the scent" of the story (176) and needs to get back, which he does by repeating verbatim the first sentence of the essay: "There are no barbers in the world to compare with those of the Celestial Empire" (171, 176). But making the main character a barber is in fact part of an elaborate set up for a pun related to the ongoing "march of the intellect" (178) debate about the role of machinery replacing productive labour. Chinese barbers travelled and set up temporary shops that then became gathering spaces where they shared news and knowledge, a role that was as essential as their barbering. Sealy calls the travelling barbers "peripatetic Heralds and Chronicles" (178) and laments that the "progress of civilization" (in the form of daily newspapers) has resulted in "the decline of barberism" (178), a wordplay (civilisation/barbarianism) that maps onto debates about the justifications of the British military presence in China.

The next story has wordplay of a different kind. The first page includes a footnote that introduces the (faux) original author as an "imminent modern poet of China" (213) and a second footnote with a similar (equally inauthentic) tone that explains lines of poetry that appear below

the title. The poem is described as written in the "original language" and attributed to "Hoo-Kah" and, according to the note, the words have "baffled every attempt at translation" (213). Those words though are English words spaced and hyphenated nonsensically, a gimmick found in "A True History" that would appear often in *Punch* as well. "The Student of Hanlan: A Tale of Opium Smoking" is a lyrical lesson in the dangers of smoking opium, although that message is perhaps too obvious and the lessons from one individual's misery may be lost in the general misery of the story. The main character, Fum-Fum, is an excellent student who is preparing to take the imperial exams:

> In learning he beat all competitors hollow;
> And, in short,
> Was a sort
> Of a pig-tailed Apollo.
>
> (214)

Fum-Fum has no equal, but he does have a rival, Fee-Fee, who is also an excellent student. Both Fum-Fum and Fee-Fee are in love with Faw-Faw, "the loveliest maid in all the Celestial Land" (216). Faw-Faw's father decides that whoever earns the highest distinction on the upcoming exams will also earn the distinction of becoming his son-in-law. Fum-Fum is quite nervous about the exams. He takes a break one day from studying to get some fresh air when a tremendous storm strikes. He ducks into a nearby house to take refuge and unwittingly steps into an opium den. Inside he sees "hideous grimaces," "jaws dropping," "sunken eyes,"

> Some fretful, some foolish,
> Some ghastly and ghoulish,
> Some half-naked skeletons, livid and green,
> Whose stagnated blood left no life in their mien;
> With lips drawn awry, and gums shrunken and
> blue,
> and their teeth black and yellow, thrust forth in
> full view.
>
> (228)

After taking in the scene and still nervous about his exams, Fum-Fum decides he is too wise to fall victim to the drug and persuades himself to "try a pipe" (227). The feeling is euphoric and the storyline predictable. His confidence surges and he recalls "books by heart he had never heard of" (230), but by the next morning the effect has worn off, so he returns for more. Meanwhile, the pomp and preparations surrounding the exams continue. The exams commence and students are eliminated one by one until only Fum-Fum and Fee-Fee remain. During the final round, Fum-Fum misses two questions and Fee-Fee misses three. The examiners ask the two to wait outside: "In Fum-Fum's favor they prepared their verdict to impart / When they heard a sudden noise that made their learned pigtails start" (236). While awaiting the decision, Fum-Fum's "rage made him hot and his scorn made him dumb" (238). He attacks and (supposedly) kills Fee-Fee by swinging him around "Till his queue / Broke in two" (238). Fum-Fum is thrown into a dungeon for a week before he is brought out and brutally punished. But just before he is to be beheaded, he is spared by Fee-Fee, who (surprisingly) has not died, at the urging of Faw-Faw, who is now Fee-Fee's wife. Fum-Fum spends the rest of his days in an opium stupor "because to be *smoked* is a way to be *cured*" (246, emphasis in original).

The last story in the collection delays the narrative portion for several pages to describe an annual "out-of-door jubilee" comparable in spirit and importance to Carnival or Christmas

(248). "The Feast of Lanterns" has elements that appear in other stories in *The Porcelain Tower* – an implausible plot involving a Chinese tradition, an unlikeable trickster and beautiful daughter, overbearing parents – but one feature dominates: "the polish of courtesy" (250). The idea that the Chinese speak in excessively deferential and self-deprecating language, known as honorifics (敬語 or *jìngyǔ*), plays out in pages of conversations with absurd *jìngyǔ* titles and phrases, playing with Western perception that the Chinese language was aesthetic and decorative like chinoiserie. The story begins when a courier drops off an unsigned letter to a servant and then departs. The letter warns Hou-Nou, a dealer in candles and oils for whom the holiday is especially profitable, that his daughter, Hey-ho, plans to go with her parents to watch the fireworks and, when all eyes were on the skies, steal away to meet with a young man named Fun and "throw herself upon his protection" (257). When questioned about her desire to attend the evening festivities, Hey-ho gives her father a low bow and replied, "I wish, with my parent's permission, to go, for the sake of fun" (258). Thus begins a confused conversation about Fun and fun that results in Hou-Nou locking his daughter in the house for the evening, an outcome that is exactly what the anonymous letter writer intended. Indeed, after Fun delivers the letter, he sneaks into the house and hides in a large vase. An illustration shows the moment Hey-ho discovers Fun after her parents depart, and another captures them escaping together, Hey-ho doing so "to spite her papa" (269). She wears a veil and together they travel to the festival. They spot Hey-ho's parents, so Fun approaches them and claims he recognises the famous merchant. Fun addresses Hou-Nou using honorifics over several pages, but he does not say his own name and only refers to himself in self-deprecating terms, i.e., "your paltry rat has the honour of addressing the very illustriousness Hou-Nou, who lives in the conspicuous corner house of the highly magnificent lane, called the Alley of Salted Sturgeon" (278). Fun tells Hou-Nou that he spotted his friend, named Fun, and a young lady outside Hou-Nou's house. Together they all return to the house and discover Hey-ho missing. The parents are heartbroken, then duped again by Fun, who locks them inside their own house. Fun then makes a promise to Hey-ho "to effect a reconciliation with her parents" (283) if she agrees to marry him, and he whisks her away in a sedan chair to his house where all the trappings and attendants of a traditional wedding ceremony await. The next morning Fun and Hey-ho return to her house, and after "bowing and bending with great humility" and surviving a "storm of abuse" that is "poured upon him" (285) from Hou-Nou and his wife, Fun buys their acceptance with pearls, gets Hou-Nou to agree in writing that he will be not punish Fun if he returns their daughter, and brings his still-veiled new wife into the room. Fun and Hey-ho then bow reverentially, reveal their real identities, and bring the story to a happy ending: "The old man raised his staff. – The young one drew out the bond. – The youthful pair fell down on their knees, and the aged pair embraced them both" (287, 289-90).

The "high guild of literary workmen"

Chang characterises faux Chinese passages such as those found in the last two stories of *The Porcelain Tower* as "a general British mockery" of "the newly understood writing system of hieroglyphics" that arbitrarily linked "printed words and spoken sounds" (74). In Western encounters with China early in the Victorian era moments of mocking and learning often co-exist. A brief review in *The World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons* from October 1841, for instance, describes the stories in *The Porcelain Tower* as "pleasing relaxation" because of their "lightness and variety" ("Literature of the Month" 1841: 234) especially compared to the "graver matter" (234) of the other book in the review, a 403-page tome that its author, Samuel

Kidd, introduced with confidence if not a generous helping of vanity as well.[11] Kidd described his book as a contribution to the many "treatises on the history and character of the Chinese language" that have been written by "scholars of considerable reputation," including his fellow "philosopher[s] and philologist[s]" whose understanding of China would be "elucidated by an accurate investigation of facts and sound analogical reasoning" (1841: 1). Sealy relied on similar works to write *The Porcelain Tower*, but he mocked them as well, especially in his preface. Even more, in the long essay that fronts "Marriage in a Mask," he dismisses the pretensions associated with certain professions and calls "philosophy and all kinds of useful knowledge…plentiful and cheap" (Sealy 1841: 175). Sealy used stories about China to distinguish himself from those who wrote philosophical treaties, claiming he was a comic philosopher and only "ambitious of a good obesity," a reference to Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff (175). In the end, the memoir in the posthumous editions of *The Porcelain Tower* placed Sealy in good company, stating he belonged to the "high guild of literary workmen" ("Memoir" 1848: xi)**.** This article then has attempted to start a conversation about Sealy's place among the comic writers and Sino-satirists who helped bring China and Chinese things into the Western literary and rhetorical imaginations.

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[11] Samuel Kidd (1799–1843) was the first Professor of Chinese at University College London (1837–42).

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