

POSTCOLONIALISM “WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS”

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When Studying images of China, created in foreign travel writing, one can hardly avoid – especially in this day and age – resorting to the tools of postcolonial analysis.

In recent years, almost all of the literary scholars who concern themselves with the representation of the Other, especially when this Other is not Western, have embraced the postcolonial approach. This is true even in the case of those who write about China. I am pointing this out because the Chinese postcolonial situation differs substantially from the one in most colonies. The main reason for this lies in the fact that China was never a colonized country in the strict sense of the word. Even during the periods of most pronounced European and North American domination the country retained its formal Chinese rulers. Generally, they were forced to comply with the will of the Western powers whose economic and especially military superiority rendered most Chinese attempts to offer resistance essentially useless.¹ Occasionally, however, there were defiant gestures on the part of the Chinese rulers. A good illustration is the conduct of the Chinese government during the proto-nationalist uprising known as the Boxer Rebellion (1898 – 1901), The Empress Dowager Cixi openly supported the rebellion and even declared war on Britain, the USA, Germany, France, Japan, Italy and Austria-Hungary and Russia, which led to the protracted siege of the Legation Quarter by the Chinese army and the Boxers.

The semi-colonial period, when the foreign powers (such as Great Britain, the USA and Japan) influenced heavily China's internal affairs and exploited its resources, often vying for supremacy, ended abruptly in 1949, when Mao Zedong came to power and put an end to almost all western influence in China for nearly three decades. With his death in 1976, however, and with the ascent to power of the relatively liberal-minded Deng Xiaoping China began to open to the rest of the world and the foreign (mostly American) influence on the Republic increased.

¹ A good example are the two Opium wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), when the Chinese empire attempted to force the Westerners to cease the import of opium from India. The ensuing military conflicts were disastrous for China and provided ample proof that the oriental empire was no match for the European military machine: a state of affairs that had largely remained unchanged since the arrival of the Portuguese merchant ships in the sixteenth century.

During the 1980's the US foothold became stronger and in the late 1990's, with the increasing influence of globalization, the spirit of semi-colonialism was somewhat revived, particularly in the eyes of the more conservative Chinese. To borrow an expression from Gina Wisker, many saw the former colonization (or semi-colonization in this case) returning in the form of "Coca-Cola-nization" and "McDonald's-nization" (Wisker 2007, 7). According to the same author, "[t]he economic effect of large multinationals ensure[s] the maintenance of a version of economic colonial power" (Wisker 2007, 7). For the first time some Western countries, mainly the USA, were actually able, without settling in the country, to influence Chinese culture heavily, even changing certain aspects of the Chinese language. For example, the very name Coca Cola is transcribed in Chinese as 'kěkōukělè', which, when translated, means 'happiness in the mouth'.

The fact that the ongoing encounter between China and the West (military, commercial, or simply discursive) – with all its historical changes and elusive peculiarities – defies a strict definition as a classic colonial encounter, does not in any way neutralize or diminish the implications of those unmistakable signs of the colonial paradigm². For this reason, although China has never been a territory that could be unproblematically called a colony of any particular European country, the most appropriate methods for conducting a critical analysis of images of China constructed in twentieth-century Western travelogues are the methods of postcolonial critique, complemented by those of imagology. This, however, needs to be done with the stipulation that, as was pointed out in the Introduction, topoi such as the West and China, or the opposition Orient – Occident, are, to a considerable extent, 'constructed' in the human imagination, and as such are liable to be defined in a variety of ways. Ludmilla Kostova observes that "entities as 'East', 'West' and 'Europe'... def[y] and evade straightforward definition. To enter the region itself is to encounter a problem of (self-) representation" (Kostova 1997, 10).

Chinese 'postcolonial amnesia' and semi-colonial baggage

An important issue which is mentioned by many postcolonial critics is the somewhat awkward or even disturbing situation whereby after the end of the colonial (or in the case of China semi-colonial) rule the people of the former colonies experience a strong desire to forget the colonial past. Leela Gandhi calls this phenomenon 'postcolonial amnesia'. "Principally, postcolonial amnesia is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new

² When I speak of 'encounter' here I do not, of course, regard it as a single event and I do not have in mind a particular time period. I look at it as an ongoing, uninterrupted process, going back to the first European contacts with China and continuing to develop today.

start – to erase painful memories of colonial subordination” (Gandhi 1998, 4). The question of whether such amnesia is/was present in the Chinese postcolonial context is important because postcolonialism is generally viewed as “a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 1998, 4). To my mind, postcolonial amnesia is not as characteristic of China as it is of other postcolonial societies. Especially during the second half of the twentieth century quite the opposite tendency can be observed: many Chinese people, prompted by government propaganda, were trying to bring to life the memories of all past humiliations at the hands of the foreign powers: the two Opium wars, the wars with Japan, the Nanjing massacre etc. In effect, there is a rapidly developing trend which can be called ‘reversed amnesia’. As evidenced by travelogues produced after the 1980’s, the painful memories are being forced back into the collective consciousness – this tendency can be observed in the writings of many present-day travel writers who concern themselves with China – very noticeably Colin Thubron and Peter Hessler. A large portion of the texts about China, produced by Western travelers, mention the museums of the Nanjing massacre, of the Opium wars, and it appears that many Chinese like to discuss these painful historical episodes.

Apart from the Chinese people’s apparent reluctance to forget their semi-colonial past, there is another powerful factor contributing to the uniqueness of the position of postcolonial studies in contemporary Chinese context: the unusual abruptness of Chinese formal departure from semi-colonialism and the plunge into a radically different political situation. The semi-colonial period in China formally ended on 1 October 1949 – the day Mao Zedong officially came to power. The quickness and the dramatic nature of the switch have greatly shortened the period of postcolonial transition: the great suffering inflicted on the Chinese people almost immediately after Mao took the reins of the country made the memories of the semi-colonial suffering fade rapidly. If this shocking entry into a new level of suffering precluded the appearance of any “euphoria of self-invention” (Gandhi 1998, 5), it also prevented some of the typical postcolonial anxieties – such as what Jameson calls “an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (Jameson 1991, 39).

Another widely acknowledged colonial-aftermath problem, which has a very different – almost unrecognizable – dimension in the Chinese context, is the often delusional postcolonial assumption that the newly independent subjects will be somehow free from colonial baggage. Albert Memmi puts a special stress on this, pointing out that “the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately. Now, I do not like to say so, but I must,

since decolonisation has demonstrated it: this is not the way it happens. The colonised lives for a long time before we see that really new man” (Memmi 1968, 88). The Chinese ‘new man’, however, has had to change his appearance a number of times during the last hundred years, which has unavoidably left an imprint on the “ambivalent cultural moods and formations which accompany periods of transition and translation” (Gandhi 1998, 5). To my mind, these periods have been far too many in recent Chinese history to be able to produce distinct cultural moods and formations. The Boxer Rebellion, the fall of the last imperial dynasty, the seizure of power by the Communists, the ‘Great leap forward’, the ‘Cultural Revolution’ and the accompanying famines, the regime change of 1976, Globalization: all these traumatizing events have made the feeling of what Said calls “dreadful secondariness” (qtd. in Xu 1999, 124) part of an immensely complex amalgam of emotions and common experiences, most of which can be discerned in twentieth-century Anglophone travel writing. What seems relatively clear, however, is the fact that by readily discussing the traumatic events of the past, many Chinese – often encouraged by the official policy of creating numerous museums of such events – are undertaking to deal with the inflicted trauma by a process of painful remembering, described by Homi Bhabha: “Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha 1994, 63). It is quite another matter, of course, that such a therapeutic process frequently leads to xenophobic outbursts, as evidenced by the texts.

Another Chinese context phenomenon with strong postcolonial-theory implications that can be detected in the writings of many Western travelers during the last hundred years is the paradigmatic and sometimes paradoxical projection of a number of West-generated Orientalist stereotypes onto the Chinese public consciousness. This phenomenon is less pronounced in the texts produced during the first half of the twentieth century but becomes increasingly conspicuous later, especially after China’s gradual opening during and after the 1980s, to reach – in the first decade of the 21st century – something of an apogee. In almost any book or article by Peter Hessler, for instance, one can observe numerous instances where the interlocutors of the American announce, with a considerable amount of pride, that the Chinese people and the Chinese ‘ways’ are radically different from the Western ones and then usually proceed to quote a set of predictable clichés and constructed images whose genesis can be discovered in the textual output of many European and North American travelers of the past. Not surprisingly, nearly all of these quoted images are positive. The same tendency, in a less developed stage, can be noticed in the books describing the Chinese travels of Colin Thubron and Paul Theroux. This observation leads

to the point made by Leela Gandhi, who writes that anticolonial and nationalist attitudes “draw upon the affirmative Orientalist stereotypes to define the authentic cultural identity in opposition to Western civilization” (Gandhi 1998, 78). This means that, as Gandhi also writes, the Orientalist discourse is “not only available to the Empire but also to its antagonists” (Gandhi 1998, 78). These positive stereotypes serve as a means of fashioning China as a utopian alternative to Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that when these stereotypes and images ‘cross over’ and become part of the Chinese discourse of self-determination, they take on functions very different from those performed in the West, especially when it comes to ideas related to the perceived inherent differences. This internalization of the difference between East and West can be clearly observed in the numerous instances where the traveler’s interlocutors describe the West as much more democratic and free, implying that the Chinese will never be fit for democracy. This is a clear case of Chinese Occidentalism: the simplistic view that the West is the home of liberal democracy and that this democracy cannot be exported successfully to China. “However Western these “Chinese” ideas may be in their origins, it is undeniable that their mere utterance in a non-Western context inevitably creates a modification of their form and content” (Chen 1995, 2).

Orientalism in a Chinese context

The roots of contemporary postcolonial critique cannot be traced to a particular moment in history but there can be little doubt that it was Edward Said’s groundbreaking text *Orientalism* which gave it a decisive impetus, put it on the worldwide academic map and “[i]n many ways... inaugurated colonial discourse studies” (Loomba 2008, 45). Gayatri Spivak, one of the most prominent contemporary theorists, declares that “the study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Said’s, has... blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for. It is an important part of the discipline now” (Spivak 1993, 56). The fundamental concept of ‘orientalism’, in the sense that Said is using it in his study, has been elaborated upon, extended and modified for more than three decades, by a great number of scholars. Its basic meaning, however, is still in the root of postcolonial analyses. Said himself gives several definitions of the term which do not contradict, but, rather, complement each other. Some of these definitions will be essential for my critical analysis of travel writing about China. Above all, to Said, orientalism is “the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said 1978, 3).

Although the theorist is mostly writing about the Middle East when he discusses Orientalism, “what he says may be applied to the Far East as well, especially to China as the paradigm and locale of the Other with its own history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary” (Longxi 1988, 114). Said also makes the following clarifications:

Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness. As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge. (Said 1978, 204)

[It is not] a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence – in which I do not for a moment believe – but... operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting. (Said 1978, 273)

The political and/or economic nature of what Said defines as orientalist³ attitude has been strongly emphasized by contemporary theorists such as Spivak. The politico-economic tinge of the twentieth-century Chinese travelogues is also quite noticeable – both in the writings of earlier politically preoccupied authors and in the seemingly apolitical texts of contemporary travelers. The orientalist – and largely constructed – distinction between ‘Westerners’ and ‘Orientals’, outlined by Said, is especially valid in a Chinese context. “The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power” (Said 1978, 36). These lines describe almost perfectly the type the situation that gradually developed in China after the sixteenth century – when the first Europeans began to arrive by sea – and reached its climax in the end of the 1900, shortly before the collapse of the Qing dynasty.

The denial of an “Oriental essence”, mentioned in an earlier quotation by Said, is also a key element in his theory and plays an important role in the paradigm of contemporary postcolonial critique. Orientalism, Said writes, “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (Said 1978, 12). There are numerous examples of this in the Western travel accounts about twentieth-century China. The imagined ‘essential’ features of the Chinese that the travelers frequently imagine invariably point to some aspect of their own background,

³ From now on I will be using the terms “orientalism” and “orientalist” in the strictly Saidean sense (comprising notions such as essentialism, denigration, and political partiality), not simply as a discipline specializing in the study of Oriental cultures.

state of mind, imagination etc. The same tendency can be observed in the interlocutors of the Western travelers when they display their ‘occidentalism’, orientalism’s “imagological other” (Kostova 1997, 15).

It appears that in order to find out what our own being is made of, to determine the features of the Self and to establish with some clarity the characteristics of the world we live in, we need to do more than just contemplate and describe what is presumed to be “us”. To complete the process of self-knowledge, we need to use a special kind of crutch – the crutch of *differentiation*. We need to determine how exactly the Other is different from us and to find the final confirmation of the Self in this difference. Homi Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, describes the problem of identity as “a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image – missing person, in visible eye, Oriental stereotype – is confronted with its difference, its Other” (Bhabha 1994, 60). In this respect Said seems to draw upon one of Benedict de Spinoza’s most famous principles: “Every individual thing, or everything which is finite and has a conditioned existence, cannot exist or be conditioned to act, unless it be conditioned for existence and action by a cause **other than itself** [my emphasis]” (Spinoza 1677, 15). This idea has found an even more radical expression in the works of Andrew L. March, who claims that “The Occident... exists only to the degree that it directs its gaze toward the Orient, confronts it, comprehends it and rejects it, borrowing something that it reworks after appropriating and counterposes, illuminated, against the dark ground of Asia” (March 1974, 36). This affirmation of the self-identity is frequently encountered in travelogues about China and seems to support March’s observation. In Chapters Three and Four it will be demonstrated that this principle of contradistinction is just as valid in a twentieth-century Chinese context.

The Self, thus, appears to be inseparably connected with the Other and nothing can possibly be determined for what it is without determining what it is not, without a certain differentiation. As Spinoza puts it, “determination is negation” (Spinoza 1677, 375). In his linguistic works, Saussure makes a similar point. Using the idea of ‘binary oppositions’ he claims that any language is in fact a system of words, or terms, which can be told from one another by means of their difference.⁴ Or, if we can tell that one thing is different from all other things which are surrounding it, it means that all we can see is the differences between them. As Zhang Longxi writes, “[i]t is indeed the image of the Self that appears through the mirror that we call the Other, and this is no less true of the Chinese than of the Europeans or Americans” (Longxi 1988, 124).

The idea that “determination is negation” was later readily taken up by Said, to whom the acquisition of a national, personal, cultural and any other kind of

⁴ See Paul Thibault – *Re-reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*

self-identity inevitably goes through creating, or rather, conjuring up, an image of the other, which is all that the self is not. To Said, if this image is not present the self-determination process is very difficult or impossible. Thus the philosophical category of “the Other” acquires a cultural value – it comes to stand for everything which Western society is not and is transformed into a curious sort of landmark: one can always get assurance of his/her personal or national identity by looking at the characteristics of the Other. According to Said, to use the Other as such a landmark, a society must not simply discover and explore it, but, rather, **invent** it.

Men make their own history, ... what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said 1978, 5)

Why would this process of pseudo-creation be necessary? Is it because the Other is, in fact, not so different from the Self? And if it is not, why is it defined as “Other”? It is obvious that the classical definition of Other as something which can be told from the Self only by means of its differences, and that Saidian necessity to invent it, contradict each other and cannot both be correct. Insofar as the genre of the travel writing is firmly set in the paradigm of imagined geographies, constructed spaces and perceived differences, in this thesis I reject the idea of objective, identifiable and constant differences that can be discovered, assorted and ‘truthfully’ described by any travel writer concerned with China (the same would be valid about a Chinese author writing about the West). In the course of my analysis I will not be attempting to measure the author’s representations against an ‘objective’ image he could have captured in his texts. It would not be, I think, a very useful analytical strategy to sustain the opposition between ‘truth’ and ‘representation’ which even Edward Said has not managed to avoid in his *Orientalism*. As Ludmilla Kostova notes, it is more productive to point out the constructedness of the image of the described Other and to “mov[e] away from the traditional categories of truth and objectivity” (Kostova 1997, 19). I contend that the process of ‘othering’ has purely subjective grounds and is seldom related to the actual cognizability of what is perceived as Other. What must remain alien is simply left outside the high walls surrounding the Self.

At the same time, however, I do not dispute the independent existence of objective reality and indeed rely on it to make some of my points. Lisle, on the

other hand, repeatedly makes it clear that she goes a step further and practically does reject the existence of objective reality.

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