

‘OBJECTIVE’ REALITY, THE PRODUCTION OF CHINA AND THE IMAGOLOGICAL PRISM

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Abstract: The paper is concerned with the modes of representation observed in a score of travelogues produced in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, paying special attention to the problem of the (non-) existence of objective reality. It discusses in some detail the imagological aspects of this problem and provides specific textual examples. The author defends the position that the arguments for the non-existence of objective reality do not hold up to rational scrutiny and demonstrates some of the ways in which such arguments can be debunked. Along with the main issue, the paper touches upon some additional concepts related to postcolonial discursive analysis such as “production of difference”, “assuredness-creating mechanism” and “Oriental essence”.

Key words: Orientalism, Travel writing, China, representation, Objective reality, imagology

The question of objective reality has always been a pertinent one when discussing imagological representations of foreign cultures, especially those perceived as ‘exotic’ by the majority of the representatives of a given culture. Since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 there has been a growing trend among literary scholars, many of whom have come to view objective reality as something non-existent, something socially constructed. One of these scholars is Debbie Lisle, who, in the past decade, has become one of the most prominent voices in the field of travel writing.

In the first chapter of her book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* Lisle states that the problem of the model according to which texts shape reality and reality shapes texts is that “it assumes there is a single, incontrovertible reality awaiting documentation by travel writers, and each travelogue can be judged for how accurately it represents this reality” (Lisle 2006, 12). In her further mentions of the words ‘reality’ and ‘real’ she insists on putting them in quotes to make it completely clear she is using them as lexical units and not because she thinks they really exist. From here it is easy to get to the idea that the cultural differences which the travel writers describe, do not exist objectively either, but are ‘produced’ by the writers themselves.

However strange it might seem for the sphere of the humanities, the rebuttal of the idea of the nonexistence of objective reality cannot be achieved through

any means except reaching for evidence in the sphere of the exact sciences. In a nutshell, since the exact sciences completely rely on the existence of objective, predictable reality, they would not be able to achieve any results, if such a reality did not exist. The evidence for the fact that results are being achieved is everywhere around us – the electric switch on the wall, the automobile on the road, the television set, etc. All these things function in a predictable way, which would not have been so if there did not exist an objective reality which is the same for all people and independent of the subjects who are perceiving it.

Occasionally, even Lisle finds it appropriate to admit that there is an objective world: “While a travelogue can translate empirical facts by fictional devices, the travel writer cannot ignore the empirical world altogether – that would lift the travelogue out of its precarious in-between position and shove it head first into fiction”, although she follows this observation with the somewhat disheartening question “[W]hy write a travelogue when you could write a novel?” (Lisle 2006, 49).

For these reasons the phrases ‘production of difference’ and ‘production of the Orient’ cannot be accepted unconditionally, no matter how convenient they might be for the discourse analysis. Peter Hessler is one of the authors who come the closest to establishing a “dialogic relationship” (Kostova 1997, 19-20) with Chinese culture. The process of difference production allows the traveler to set what he/she perceives as ‘home’ in an imagined, untouchable space, identified almost exclusively by a process of differentiation from the foreign space (China). The foreign space must necessarily remain looking different, dangerous and even then unnatural. From this angle, it is not surprising that one of the main strategies for othering, utilized by those endeavoring to present China as essentially ‘different’, is the construction of Chinese unnaturalness. The instances where we can see this strategy at work are numerous: the uncanny, schizophrenic transformations that Colin Thubron imagines in his interlocutors on a regular basis, Bill Holm’s representation of foot binding, which he describes as “something never seen in nature” (Holm 1990, 55) etc.

Excellent examples of this assuredness-generating mechanism can be found in Polly Evans’s *Fried Eggs with Chopsticks*. Periodically – every three or four pages – Evans can be found making an implicit or explicit comparison, with China always turning out on the wrong end of it. Not having even the most rudimentary knowledge of the Chinese language, the traveler appears to be always able to put her finger on the exact differences between China and England. This imaginary detection unfailingly assures her of her own British identity and produces the soothing effect of highlighting – in the author’s mind – the innumerable instances where England is ‘much better’ than China. This kind of travel narratives is a nearly perfect illustration of the fact that “[t]he distinction

between centre and periphery plays a major role in the master narratives of Eurocentrism in which ever since the eighteenth century (North) Western Europe has inscribed itself as the centre of civilisation” (Kostova 1997, 10-11).

The assuredness-creating mechanism, however, is not an inevitable characteristic of every travel account whose author is of a critical disposition. Paul Theroux, for example, has produced some of the most scathing prose that can be found in twentieth-century travel accounts of China, but his harsh criticism is, in most cases, one-directional. Theroux’s self-identity seems to be relatively stable and he does not feel the need to reaffirm it by explicitly contrasting Britain with China.

Said makes it clear that this indispensable ‘essence’ of the other is produced by the orientalists but this does not prevent him from making essentializing statements such as “every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric” (Said 1978, 204). As Loomba observes, “Said’s book denies the claim of objectivity or innocence not only within Oriental studies but on the part of any Western scholarship” (Loomba 2008, 45). In effect, Said seems to “cancel the validity of any Western scholarship on the East” (Kramer 2001, 33) when he declares that any Westerner studying or writing about the Orient comes up against it “as a European or American first, as an individual second” (Said 1978, 11).

The question of the “Oriental essence” is a central one in travel writings about China. Even when the authors do not address it directly, they are chronically preoccupied with figuring out what exactly makes the Chinese culture distinctly Chinese and how it differs from their own Western background. This holds true both for very early authors such as Marco Polo and for contemporary travelers such as Peter Hessler. These endeavors almost invariably result not in discovery of essential difference but to its discursive production.

The problem of whether “[c]olonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact” (Said 1978, 39), in other words the direction of the causal relationship between colonialism and discursive practices, is not central to this paper. I am chiefly concerned with the mechanisms of image-creation by various types of travelers, both before and after China was turned into a semi-colony.¹

The concept of ‘imperialism’, discussed at length by Said in his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*, is important chiefly because of its close connection with colonialism. While sometimes critics tend to use the terms interchangeably, Said makes the following distinction: “imperialism means the practice, the

¹ I will employ the term “semi-colony” in the way it has been used by contemporary authors in connection with Chinese domination by foreign powers. See for example *Chinese Modernity and the Peasant Path: Semicolonialism in the Northern Yangzi Delta* by Kathy Le Mons Walker and *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* by Shu-mei Shih.

theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; "colonialism", which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said 1993, 9). In a Chinese context, 'imperialism' appears to be a rather useful concept which, unlike 'colonialism', does not need to be modified by prefixes. The obvious imperialist attitude of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers in China did not disappear with the dissolution of the ambitions of the Western empires and Russia in the middle of the twentieth century. Residue of this attitude can be detected even in the texts produced in the first decade of twenty-first century.

Directly related to travel writing about China is Said's strong critique of the form of historicism adopted by orientalist authors. In his paper "Orientalism Reconsidered" he claims that as far as European knowledge of other cultures have been concerned, "historicism meant that the one human history uniting humanity either culminated in or was observed from the vantage point of Europe, or the West" (Said 1985, 101). This attitude of Western authors, representatives of imperialist states, towards the colonized or semi-colonized countries, such as China, seems to be at the centre of Said's argument. It was at the same time combined with the ahistorical representation (indeed, the construction) of the Oriental societies and cultures as eternally static, unchanged by history and hopelessly entangled in the folds of European (and later North American) imaginative geography.

This mode of representation is regarded in modern postcolonial critique as one of the classic signs of imperialist attitude – either manifest or latent. According to Said, the gradual accumulation of factual information about Oriental history did not lead to the examination of the connection between European imperialism and these newly-acquired knowledges.

What... has never taken place is an epistemological critique at the most fundamental level of the connection between the development of a historicism which has expanded and developed enough to include antithetical attitudes such as ideologies of Western imperialism and critiques of imperialism on the one hand, and, on the other, the actual practice of imperialism by which the accumulation of territories and population, the control of economies, and the incorporation and homogenization of histories are maintained (Said 1985, 101).

The images of China produced during the twentieth century testify to the validity of this argument. The myth of the eternal stasis of the Oriental empire, fabricated by earlier travelers and perpetuated both by their texts and by the very societies they were directed at, is clearly visible even in the travelogues produced towards the end of the period under discussion. In other words, although "the window through which we look at the world" (Isaacs ix) became somewhat larger, the view that it offered remained very similar.

The prism of Imagology

The discussion of the problem of objective reality would not be complete without mentioning the theoretical model of Imagology: “the critical study of national characterization” (Leerssen 2007, 21). From the very description of the discipline it becomes clear that it is concerned mostly with stereotypes, imagined ‘realities’ and essentializing. Manfred Beller defines the aims of imagology like this: “It is the aim of imagology to describe the origin, process and function of national prejudices and stereotypes, to bring them to the surface, analyze them and make people rationally Aware of them. But it would be illusory to think that we can remove the affective reasons for our prejudices” (Beller 2007, 12). In the same spirit, Bock warns that “national identities’ are a matter of political-intellectual projection, a state of mind rather than an objective set of conditions and facts or a ‘given” (qtd. in Beller 2007, 12).

The applicability of such a scholarly approach to a study of the representations of China by various travel writers seems beyond reasonable doubt. Indeed, almost every single travel narrative can be viewed as a case study in a separate mode of constructing, stereotyping, portraying and essentializing the Chinese Other. At the same time, every single text is indicative not only of how China and the Chinese are imagined and portrayed but also of the author’s tendency to construct largely stereotyped images of himself or herself. A considerable number of passages that seemingly dwell on a particular ‘characteristic feature’ of the Chinese people or their culture, are in fact more about the traveler’s own self than what he or she appears to be discussing on the surface. As Leerssen reminds us, [t]he nationality represented (the *spected*) is silhouetted in the perspectival context of the representing text or discourse (the *spectant*). For that reason, imagologists will have particular interest in the dynamics between those images which characterize the Other (*hetero-images*) and those which characterize one’s own, domestic identity (*self-images* or *auto-images*). Both *spected* and *spectant* are usually categorized in national terms (Leerssen 2007, 27).

One important aspect of imagology which relates it to contemporary postcolonial theory is its rejection of any suggested ‘realness’ of the so-called national character. Thus, while it was as early as the ancient times that “ethnocentric perspectives and stereotypes in the perception of foreignness became an instrument of expressing hostility and legitimating warfare” (Nippel 2007, 33), the imagological analysis of these perspectives did not become possible until their constructedness and fluidity had been realized and dwelt upon by the scholars whose work led to the inception of Postcolonial studies. In other words, certain conditions need to be met for imagological analysis to even become possible: “The actual emergence of imagology as a critical study of na-

tional characterization could only take place after people had abandoned a belief in the 'realness' of national characters as explanatory models" (Leerssen 2007, 21). Leerssen also categorically relates imagology to deconstructive critical analysis (2007, 17). It should, however, be pointed out that as far as China is concerned there is not a single dominating mode of imagological representation. The different periods – both within the twentieth century and in the history of Sino-European relationships as a whole – often encourage the appearance of differing constructed images. Western political interests in China, as well as the travelers' individual attitudes, also exercise considerable influence on what images are produced. Thus, while Hoppenbrouwers's observation that "[m]ockery, ridicule and abuse figure largely in ethnic or national stereotyping (a term which rightly emphasizes the repetitiveness and lack of originality in ethnic joking)" (Hoppenbrouwers 2007, 56) is valid when one is discussing travelers such as Paul Theroux and Polly Evans, it is not so poignant when we analyze the text of authors such as Hessler or Bob Gifford who employ quite different methods of constructing China and the Chinese.

In imagology itself, however, there are at least two rather problematic areas:

1. In spite of the fact that Leerssen and other imagological theorists frequently stress on the subjectivity and the constructedness of the images produced by Westerners, their discussions often leave the impression that there must exist, in some undefined space accessible to all members of a particular culture, a reservoir of ready images available to any person who would like to reach for them and use them when speaking about a foreign people. This implication can be detected, for instance, in the above-quoted passage where Leerssen talks about the dynamics between the images which describe the Other and those that characterize one's own identity (2007, 27). The created impression is that these two types of images are 'placed' in separate – though unsafe – containers and are able to interact with each other when the conditions allow it. To my mind this substantially undermines the basic idea of subjectiveness/constructedness of the images produced and, in effect, deprives the image creating process of much of its dynamism and complexity. It stereotypes, so to speak, the very process of stereotyping.

The analysis of travel narratives about China reveals a different story. As soon as one has examined more than one or two texts he/she is made aware of the unstable and fluid character of the images produced. This fluidity is fostered by an array of factors (such as the author's expectations, personal emotions, education, background, choice of interlocutors, temperament and political views) and precludes the entrance of the created images into an existing 'database' to be used by others. Even when the travelers use images they have encountered in

someone else's writings – which happens quite frequently – they invariably add to them their own personal twist and practically transform them into unique images. Thus, even if one decides to accept the idea of the 'reservoir' of images, he/she should make it perfectly clear that such a reservoir is always personal and does not belong to a fixed common database of images.

2. The second problematic area of the imagological approach is related to its closeness to postcolonial theory and discourse analysis. The problem is that imagology can be viewed, as I see it, as a mere addendum to Postcolonial Studies. Its aims, as quoted above, are obviously reminiscent of the deconstructive tasks defined by postcolonial theorists. The difference between the two disciplines does not seem to go deeper than the mere width of theoretical scope. Discussing the method of imagology, Leerssen writes:

The ultimate perspective of image studies is a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, not a theory of cultural or national identity. Imagology is concerned with the *representamen*, representations as textual strategies and as discourse. That discourse implicitly raises a claim of referentiality vis-à-vis empirical reality, telling us that nation X has a set of characteristics Y, yet the actual validity of that referentiality claim is not the imagologist's to verify or falsify. The imagologist's frame of reference is a textual and intertextual one (2007, 27).

Imagology, it appears, discusses stereotypes but not identity, the textual practices but not the extra-textual political factors behind them. Postcolonial theory, however, already deals with these issues. The difference is that the extra-textual factors are also taken into account, as well as the extra-textual implications of discourse-generated images. In other words, postcolonial theory is much more comprehensive.

Another problem is generated by the fact that some of the theorists of imagology occasionally exhibit a tendency to accept the possibility that there might exist a 'true' opinion of a given people. Beller, for instance, after stating that "we use the term *image* as the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race", makes the following observation: "At this point, the truthfulness of such images should be questioned: Are we sure that we see what we think we see? Are our opinions about other persons or peoples *true*? [my emphasis]" (Beller 2007, 4). This leads us once again to the highly questionable opposition 'true-untrue' which, as I already pointed out, I try to avoid in my analysis. Woltering, on the other hand, contradicts Beller: "Imagology does not try to establish the truth of the image. It is not up to an imagologist to study the extent to which one author was right in portraying some nation in a certain manner" (2007, 13).

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