

OCCIDENTALISM: A THEORY OF COUNTERDISCOURSE IN POST-MAO CHINA

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Originally published in 1995 by Oxford University Press, *Occidentalism* was the first book to develop the concept of "Occidentalism," and the first comprehensive study of Occidentalism in post-Mao China as a response to post-colonial theories. It offers an insightful account of the unremittingly favorable depiction of Western culture and its negative characterization of Chinese culture in post-Mao China since 1978. Chen examines the cultural and political interrelationship between the East and West from a vantage point more complex than that accommodated by most current theories of Western imperialism and colonialism. Going beyond Edward Said's construction in *Orientalism* of cross-cultural appropriations as a defining facet of western imperialism, Chen argues that the appropriation of Western discourse---what she calls Occidentalism"---can actually have a politically and ideologically liberating effect on contemporary non-Western culture. She maintains that simplistic allegations of Orientalism frequently found in current critical discourses seriously underestimate the complexities of intercultural and multicultural relationship. Using China as a focus of her analysis, Chen examines a variety of cultural media, from contemporary Chinese television documentary to Shakespearean drama, to Western modernist poetry, and to the Chinese Diaspora fictions and reportage. She thus places Sinology in the general context of Western theoretical discourses, such as Euro-centrism, post-colonialism, nationalism, modernism, feminism, and literary hermeneutics, showing that it has a vital role to play in the study of Orient and Occident and their now unavoidable symbiotic relationship. *Occidentalism* presents a new model of comparative literary and cultural studies that re-envision cross-cultural appropriation and post-colonialist debates.

Taking account of arguments against cross-cultural appropriations--above all that they perpetuate potentially harmful "mis-perceptions" about the "Other"--Chen demonstrates, in Chapter One, that the positive image of a "scientific and modern West" so strikingly portrayed in the controversial television series *River Elegy* (河殇 1988) has too easily—and facilely--been characterized as an act of Western "cultural imperialism," as that term is now defined in Post-colonial and Third World discourses. Considered within the specific cultural and historical context of post-Mao society, however, such "Occidentalism" can also be understood as a powerful anti-official discourse, which has been persistently employed by the Chinese intelligentsia to express what is politically impossible and ideologically inconceivable. The Western "Other" thus serves as a metaphor for a political liberation against ideological oppression within a totalitarian society. What might rightly be considered at times as a global, "central" discourse of "Occidentalism" can also sometimes be used or "misused" as a locally "marginal" or "peripheral" discourse against the centrality of the dominant power in a particular culture. Under these special circumstances, therefore, arguing absolutely against cultural imperialism can be politically dangerous since it inevitably, if unintentionally, supports the status quo of a ruling ideology, which sees in the Western "Other" a potentially powerful alliance with an anti-official force at home.

To further illustrate the positive uses of things Western in contemporary China, Chapter Two examines the Occidental theater in post-Mao China and argues that the production and reception of plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Brecht serve as a counter-cultural Other in the Chinese intellectuals' anti-official discourse; thus it

challenges the predominant ruling ideology which emerged after the Cultural Revolution. Chen argues that the popularity of those otherwise remote Occidental texts lies in their existential proximity to Chinese audiences in the early 1980's, who "mis-read" *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Peer Gynt* (by Ibsen) and other such texts as immediately relating to their traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Through these successful productions of Occidental plays, the Chinese people were by no means self-inflicting a European colonialism upon themselves. On the contrary, it is the Orient, which "anti-imperialistically" used the Occident to achieve its own political aims at home through deliberate acts of "misunderstanding" of the Occidental Other. It is for such a political end that the Chinese dramatists, critics, and audiences can rightly justify their "anti-imperialistic" means, with which they have successfully fragmented the Maoist ideological superstructure in the very re-presentation and dramatization of a Western Other.

Indeed, one can argue that the entire modern Chinese history and its problematic and paradoxical relationship with a Western Other can be seen as a highly theatrical event, in which the Chinese people play the roles of the Occidental Others in Shakespearean, Ibsenique, or Brechtian drama. The Chinese actors and actresses assume Occidental voices, wearing Occidental costumes, while speaking, all the time, for the political interests of the Oriental Self. The Chinese actors and actresses have carried out dramatic dialogues with the Chinese audiences, who are drawn into the Occidental plots precisely because they see in these very plots the stark reality of contemporary China. Thus such recent dramatic history, which makes prominent a presence of Occidental stage in a post-colonialist country such as contemporary China, should not be slighted as a mere incident of a self-infliction of colonialism by the colonized people themselves. It should rather be appreciated as an intricate event in which the East and the West are brought together by their own specific cultural and historical conditions in which neither the East nor the West are--or should be--fundamentally privileged over its Other.

Chapter Three explores the critical debate on *Menglong* Movement (蒙胧诗) in which the *menglong* poets in post-Cultural-Revolutionary China called for the replacement of traditional Chinese poetics by the importation of Western modernism. Both the *menglong* poets and the critics who repudiated their "non-revolutionary" poetry, however, "misread" Ezra Pound's modernistic aesthetics even in giving it lip service; both claimed that Western modernism was a "self-expressive" movement, a term that Western scholars would more easily associate with the poetic conventions of romanticism that Pound had sought to displace by importing the "Chinese" ideograph. From this perspective, it is impossible to speak of contemporary Chinese literature and its reception in the 1980s without taking into serious account the indispensable role that, as a form of ideology in the voice of a counter Other, Western modernism has played in the Chinese debate on *menglong* poetry. Yet such acts of "misprision," nevertheless, are to be appreciated, not regretted, since they provided the only way that Western modernism could make sense to the Chinese readers and writers whose worldview and aesthetic innovations were conditioned by the cultural and historical specifics of early post-Mao Chinese society.

The paradoxical and dialectical history of this cultural exchange is further studied in Chapter Four, which focuses on the production and reception of Gao Xingjian's (高行健) *Wildman* (《野人》, 1985), a play which has been regarded as one of the best productions of contemporary China in the 1980s. The theatrical form of Gao's play has been viewed both as fundamentally Western and Chinese, as showing the influence of traditional Chinese drama and, in contrast, as written under the influence of Artaudian and Brechtian aesthetics (which is itself based on a "misunderstanding" of Chinese operatic theater). In Chapter Five, Chen traces a parallel case in the study of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which has also been claimed by both traditions--the Western and the Chinese operatic traditions alike. Yet it was these Occidental dramatists' theories and practices that helped shape the newest formation of dramatic theory in China as reflected in Huang Zuolin's search for an

"Essentialist Theater" which attempts to combine the best of the dramatic traditions both from the Orient and the Occident.

Chen argues that both of these cases offer us insight into the role that the "misconception" of the Other plays in the creation of cross-cultural East-West cultural contacts and literary history in our century. Both the Chinese appropriation of aspects of Western culture and the Western appropriation of facets of Chinese culture have been motivated by a desire to forsake what is indigenous to each culture and to incorporate into it apparently alien elements. Orientalism and Occidentalism are thus revealed as complex phenomena functioning in Western and non-Western culture. Neither can be ignored either by the student of Chinese or Western literature. These chapters lead to the conclusion that for Sinology, world literature and culture can no longer be ignored or assigned a secondary status as mere source or influence. Neither can they be simply labeled as expressions of Occidentalism and hence dismissed as acts of cultural imperialism. Especially in view of the increasing exchanges between cultures, Sinology cannot exist without Western contacts and without the contexts of Western texts. It is not possible to speak of a "purely" Chinese tradition, nor of Western tradition that is "uncontaminated" by things Chinese. This situation points to yet another important aspect of the way that Occidentalism can be viewed as a positive and liberating force in recent Chinese literature and culture.

Yet to emphasize the politically liberating force of Occidentalism in the formation of literary history in contemporary China is not to ignore that Occidentalism is multi-faceted, and can at times become ideologically limiting and confining. Like every human utterance caught within the prison-house of language, Occidentalism as a counter discourse contains seeds of its own contradiction, subversion, and destruction. Therefore, Chen stresses in Chapter Six the problematic nature of Occidentalism by recounting a profound irony in an earlier episode in modern Chinese dramatic history. Chen argues that on the one hand, male May Fourth playwrights considered writing about women's issues of liberation and equality important political and ideological strategies in their formation of a counter-tradition and a counter-canon against the Confucian ruling ideology. In such a peculiar "male-dominated-feminist" discourse, they found in the image of the West a powerful weapon against the predominant ruling ideology of Confucianism. When the West is so used as a strong anti-official statement against Confucian traditional culture, this Occidentalist discourse can be regarded as politically liberating. On the other hand, however, in view of the particular historical conditions of the May Fourth period, which is characterized by its embracing of an anti-imperialistic agenda as its top priority, the appeal to the West needs to be understood in the contexts of the complex gender politics in relation to the issues of nation and state.

The revised, expanded, and second edition of *Occidentalism* published in 2002 by Rowman & Littlefield includes a new preface, foreword by Dai Jinhua, and new chapter on Chinese diaspora writings in the Chinese language. Unlike the majority of Chinese American Literary studies that focus on English-language materials and one's experience living in America, Chen discusses those writers who had travelled to the West and wrote about their "Western experience" in the Chinese language for a home audience, who shared their vision of a troubled and yet hopeful China. Situated in the native circumstances, these narratives provide a dialogic space that transforms geographical regions into diverse cultural conceptions of selves and others. Chen first discusses Chinese diaporic stories in the 1920s, such as Li Jieren's (李劫人) "Sympathy (《同情》, 1923)," Jiang Guangci's (蒋光慈, 《鸭绿江上》, 1926), and Zhang Wentian's (张闻天) "Journey (《旅途》, 1924)." She then compares their views of the Others with those expressed in Hu Ping (胡平) and Zhang Shengyou's (张胜友) reportage writings (报告文学) in the 1980s, such as *Exchanging Revolutionary Experience in the World* (《世界大串联》, 1987), Zhou Li's (周励) autobiographical fiction *A Chinese Woman in Manhattan* (《曼哈

顿的中国人》,1992), and Hu Ping's *Immigrating to America* (《移民美国》, 1997). Chen explores the following questions: Before these writers' sojourn abroad, what were the native circumstances that motivated their emigrant experience? During their sojourn abroad, how did they define themselves as "Chinese" in order to construct their own identities in opposition to everything else they construed as "un-Chinese"? In addition to their Asian Pacific economic and cultural activities, what were the discursive powers at work that negated or compensated for their status in their immigrant countries? When we talk about Chinese trans-nationalism in the geopolitics of the twentieth century, to what extent can we recover the subject positions of Chinese writers who narrated their own diaspora experience in the Chinese language for a domestic readership in China? While taking into consideration the importance of the semi-colonial experience in the beginning of twentieth century, this study reminds its readers that modern Chinese literary histories cannot be seen as pre-conditioned by a so-called predominant Western colonialization, but as formative sites where Chinese writers can and have been actively constructing their own stories, from their native perspectives and with a voice of their own.

Occidentalsim has received positive reviews by scholarly journals. *Choice* believed that "Chen offers a new theoretical framework on cultural studies." *Kirkus Reviews* regarded the books as "An ambitious, revisionist challenge to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. . . . Chen's thesis is fundamentally sound, supportable, and intellectually challenging." *The Comparatist* regarded *Occidentalsim* as "An innovative 'deconstruction' or reversal of Said's view of Orientalism as the hegemonic construction of a silenced Other," and "shows that Chinese Occidentalism is a pluralistic reading of the West" with "compelling and wide-ranging examples." "Lucidly argued, convincing, and elegantly written, Chen's study is a major contribution to East-West studies, comparative literature, and cultural hermeneutics." *Research on African Literatures* appreciated "Chen's sagacious analysis of the deliberate and productive misreading of Western cultural texts by the Chinese public" which "shows how the Western Other also engages in the invention of the West for internal political purpose. . . . *Occidentalism* has the virtue of providing a more polyphonic history of cultural relations as its author weaves into her study voices representing different social, political and gender groups." *World Literature Today* depicted the book as "A stimulating contribution to the debate, not only because she offers an insider's perspective, but also because she is aware of the limitations of oppositional modes of thought." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* believed that "Through a superb account of select developments in post-Mao poetry and spoken drama, the book provides a model for a study of exchanges between cultures that does not rely on essential categories such as 'East' and 'West.' Chen suggests that this is an error to which even those enlightened by Said are prone as they dismantle Orientalist fantasies and lament foreign influences in China. *Occidentalism* makes clear the limitations of Said's book for one who works, so to speak, from the inside out."