

Orientalism and the Western Stereotypical Portrayal of East Asians

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Abstract: Eastern people and cultures have been experiencing prejudice and stereotypes brought about by Orientalism, thus making the Chinese suffer from exclusion and discrimination in the Western world. In this paper, we will analyze and discuss the stereotypes of the Western world caused by Orientalism and its effects and consequences in three parts. First of all, it is important to understand what Orientalism really means and what its purpose is before discussing it. In order to explore why the Western world has such prejudices and stereotypes about the Eastern world, we will mainly analyze and discuss the theoretical and historical reasons. Finally, the consequences of stereotypes will be elaborated, making it clear that stereotypes cause Chinese and Eastern cultures to pay for the desires and superiority of Westernism. It is because Western thought wants to portray and create an antagonism and superior status that the artificial product of Orientalism is created. The dissemination and propaganda of the orientalist and culture out of context and malicious fiction has caused the Chinese to suffer unfair and unjust treatment until today.

1. What is orientalism?

To explore the extent to which Orientalism has played a role in post-Cold War international relations, particularly between the West and East Asia. One of the first questions to understand is, what is Orientalism? In general terms, Orientalism is a part of post-colonialism [1]. Orientalism is the "political mirror" set by the West to control the East. In order to strengthen their own identity, Westerners put the West in the position of "self" and the East in the position of "other", and construct an Orientalism based on the "West-East" opposition that does not conform to objective facts and degrades the East, in order to set up the universal applicability of the Western value system and the "other". Orientalism, which is not in line with objective facts and derogatory to the East, is constructed on the basis of the "West-East" antagonism, in order to set off the universal applicability of the Western value system and the specificity and backwardness of the "other" culture. Constructed Orientalism is closely related to the operation of power and is a reflection of the unequal relationship between East and West and the Western cultural hegemony and colonial mentality.

In the book *Orientalism*, Said (2016) refines the meaning of Orientalism by highlighting three dimensions: the discipline of scholarship, the way of thinking, and the way of power discourse [2]. Thus, for Europe, the East is neither a pure fiction or fantasy in the quadrilateral world and thought, nor a naturally formed existence, but an artificially created system of theory and practice, containing the material dimension accumulated over a long history. Its essence is to establish a clear dividing line between the East and the West, thus highlighting the superiority of Western culture.

2. The origin of the stereotype of Orientalism

Once the nature of Orientalism and its ideology and purpose are clearly understood, it is easy to see the inevitability of the existence of prejudice. This prejudice is the result of people, especially those who are deeply influenced by Western culture, consciously or unconsciously understanding and viewing the Eastern world with the attitude of European imperial superiority of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or the old-fashioned prejudiced and narrow understanding and interpretation of

Eastern culture and humanities. As a result, both Orientalist culture and humanities are heavily stereotyped and even antagonistic in descriptive texts or film and television works.

2.1. Theoretical basis: Said's Orientalism

According to Said, Orientalism is "a mechanism for dealing with the East by making representations about it, by authoritatively asserting views about it, by describing, teaching, colonizing, and dominating it: in short, by seeing Orientalism as a way for the West to control, reconstruct, and dominate it". Thus, it is evident that "there is a relationship of power, of domination, of hegemony between the West and the East" [2]. Therefore, in the history of literature, Orientalist writers often ignored the true face of the East and had no qualms about demonizing the image of the East and trampling on Eastern civilization [3,4]. Orientalism allowed Orientalists to give full vent to the West's sense of superiority over the East [5]. It also enabled the consolidation and strengthening of the West's central hegemony by degrading and denigrating the East and marginalizing it [6].

This was followed by the so-called "self-orientalization" of the Orient, a situation that further entrenched the stereotypes of the Orient and Oriental culture in the West, even to the extent that the Orientals saw themselves and their culture in the same light, thus adding to the sense of superiority in the Western world. However, Arif Dirlik's article "Chinese History and the Problem of Orientalism" in *History and Theory*, Volume 35, "Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective," "points to the contemporary 'self-orientalization' of Asian intellectuals, which is not a sign of powerlessness but of newly acquired strength." [7]. On this point, Dirlik succinctly argues that "Orientalism, as part of this epistemological reordering of the world, is not merely an intellectual tool of imperialism; it is "intellectual imperialism." For Said, Orientalism is the meaning of "discourse" as used by Michel Foucault." Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as dealing with the corporate agency of the East - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing perceptions of it, describing it, by teaching it, addressing it, ruling it; in short, Orientalism is a Western style that dominates, restructures, and has authority over the East. "It is important to emphasize here that while Said is quite aware of the complex relationship between power and Orientalism, he insists that Orientalism does not merely serve or represent power; it is itself "the distribution of geopolitical consciousness in aesthetic, academic, eco-atomic, sociological, historical, and linguistic texts" [7]. In short, Orientalism exists in a theoretical context as the epistemology of discourse as a power, and so it is an integral part of the hostility, antagonism, and prejudice of modern Euro-American culture, both conscious and unconscious, toward Eastern cultures [2,7].

2.2. Historical reasons: Chinese immigration to America

The history of early Chinese immigration to the United States is a painful history of blood and tears [8]. Mass Chinese immigration to the United States began in 1849. Because of historical reasons, the Chinese people at that time were in a living purgatory of hardship and poverty. The United States, on the other hand, was the era of great economic upsurge when gold was discovered and actively mined. So there was the "gold rush" at that time. But for the Chinese people at that time could not afford to buy a boat ticket to the United States, more Chinese people went to the United States because the Americans needed cheap miners' labor and hired Chinese miners in large quantities to go to the United States [9,10]. And with the large number of miners portraying the Chinese on American soil, stereotypes emerged. The Chinese became black and dirty cheap labor in the Western perspective, and thus the Westerners had a sense of superiority as hired men in a dictatorial position of power [10].

As the number of immigrants grew, the yellow-skinned foreigners increasingly faced hate and discrimination. After the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1882, the situation of the Chinese became more and more difficult [11]. The immigrants were associated with the negative aspects of social interactions. The early Chinese immigrants, who were ostracized and discriminated against, were largely silenced, and their cries for survival and acceptance were extremely weak. The voices soon drowned out due to the hostile roar of mainstream society. As a result, they were left to the Orientalists, who fabricated their image at will but could do nothing about it.

3. The dominant Western culture's hegemony of control

Orientalism emphasizes the opposition between the West and the East, an opposition that triggers stereotypes and hostility. In order to better realize the superiority of the West over the East and the ruling class, the propaganda of Orientalism cannot be lacking, for example, the image of Chinese in movies and films is the best example of Orientalism. The image representing the West is always righteous, wise and civilized, while the image representing the East is inevitably evil, stupid, uncivilized, or even horrible and frightening.

The most far-reaching stereotypical depictions of men are those of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan [12]. Fu Manchu is the personification of the "real plague" [13]. The image was originally created by Irish author Sax Rohmer and subsequently became popular in the United States. It can be said that Fu Manchu brings together the worst of Western imaginings of the Chinese (Chen, 2022).

"Imagine a man, tall, thin, as silent as a cat, with high shoulders, a Shakespearean forehead, a Satanic face, a shaven head, and long, unattractive eyes shining with a cat-like green. He combines all the cruelty, cunning, and wisdom of the Orientals, and can unwittingly mobilize all the resources a wealthy government can muster. Imagine such a terrible man, and you have a picture of Dr. Fu Manchu in your mind" [14].

His image is always associated with murder and darkness. Sax Rohmer believed that Western society had taught him advanced science and technology. However, instead of giving it back, he would challenge and threaten the Western order, which was not a normal person, but evil in disguise [15]. Fu Manchu represents only the unrealistic imagination of the West and depicts the deep-seated hatred of the West towards the East. In addition, the stereotypical portrayal of Oriental women is not spared. In film, television and literature, Oriental women are usually portrayed as two types of women, one is sexy and dangerous, the embodiment of evil, will be good at seducing men but at the same time have a great scheme, but usually have a fatal weakness, that is, will certainly be in the face of white people cannot fight [15]. The other image of the Oriental woman is quiet, small and submissive, always with the man as her master and controller, and to serve and serve men with all her heart and soul. From the stereotypical portrayal of Oriental women, it is easy to see that both the vicious and dangerous and the meek and docile are easily conquered by white men. It is through this stereotypical portrayal and propaganda that the Western world wants to satisfy fantasies and vanity, thus enhancing once again the sense of superiority and satisfaction of domination.

It is thus clear that the out-of-context and unwarranted disparagement of Eastern culture highlights the superiority of the West on the basis of the disparagement of the East. In this way, the absolute superiority and suppression of the West over the East is achieved.

4. Consequences of stereotypes

But none of the images of the Orientals portrayed by Orientalists are actually true of Chinese-Americans. And certainly not a true picture of native Chinese people. The Western world's understanding and perception of Chinese people, whether in literature, film or television, is based on a series of uninformative and unrealistic sources, imagined and fabricated. It can be said that the so-called image of Chinese people, and even the image and culture of Oriental people, are all imagined to satisfy the desires of people in the Western world. As Said (2016) also clearly shows, Orientalism itself is not a product of Eastern culture and reality, it is only a fiction of the present Western mind. Therefore, its exaggeration and vilification of the East is the inevitable result, while at the same time, such a result is imposed on the East and the people of the East are made to bear the effects and consequences of it.

Exaggerated, scandalous images and cultural communications have severely distorted the image of the Chinese and caused severe psychological trauma to Chinese immigrants. On the practical level of life, Chinese also cannot get the protection and fairness they deserve to live and work in the Western world, and they face prejudice and hostility brought about by many obstacles and stereotypes. With stereotypical portrayals, Western writers succeeded in reducing Chinese immigrants to barbaric, backward, cowardly, and irrational [16]. Meanwhile, the writers portrayed the West as civilized,

progressive, powerful, and rational. This huge contrast became a pretext for Western rulers to marginalize and control Chinese immigrants [17]. Hence, they could only be in the position of "the other" in American society and could never be "the center."

On the other hand, the misguided orientalism has also kept the masses in the Western world from really getting to know the good side of Chinese and Chinese culture. For example, not only are the Chinese hardworking, thrifty, kind, friendly and hard-working side of the culture not properly treated and given the opportunity to work and live in a fair and equitable manner, but the Western world does not even think that the Chinese have these virtues and qualities that deserve to be seen and discovered.

5. Conclusion and reflection

Based on the many negative effects and hindrances that Orientalism and the profound and deep-rooted stereotypical portrayals and impressions it provokes have brought to Chinese immigrants, or even just the present-day Eastern world and masses, it becomes especially urgent to subvert the stereotypical images and build a positive image of Chinese immigrants and the culture of the Eastern world. Throughout history, many Chinese Americans, especially prestigious celebrities, such as writers, actors, and politicians, have taken on the burden of promoting and guiding positive images and ideas. Although many times there are disagreements and controversies, through the efforts and debates, the ideas of subverting stereotypes have become clearer and the direction has become more firm and clear, which is very helpful to help the subsequent Chinese immigrants to be able to get fair and just treatment faster. Showing a positive image of Chinese to the Western public and allowing the Western world to redefine the identity status of the Orientals, thus helping Chinese immigrants to gradually find their place back.

Reflecting on "Orientalism," it raises many thoughts and questions, not only about the cultural differences between the East and the West, but also about the differences between cultures and the degree of tolerance and understanding of the other by various cultures and peoples. Culture itself has no superiority or inferiority, and each nation's culture has its own incomparable value. Nowadays, countries around the world are becoming more and more closely connected, and the collision and integration of cultures are becoming more and more frequent, all working towards a common development goal. In addition to economic pluralistic cooperation, a pluralistic social environment of mutual respect and understanding among various cultures and nationalities will also become an inevitable trend and result instead of continuing to live in a world of conflict, mistrust, denigration and exclusion.

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