

# Arrogance and Bias Behind Orientalism: A Case Study of *On a Chinese Screen*

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## ABSTRACT

When it comes to the literary works about Orientalism, Maugham's famous travel book *On a Chinese Screen* will surely be mentioned. Under his work, China is shrouded in the mysterious veil of Orientalism. Why China is considered like a mystery? The reason is that mystery will satisfy westerners' hunt for novelty about China. In the background of the rise of the British Empire, this series of prejudice and superiority to the images of China appear prominently in this literary work.

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, bias, racial superiority*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When people talk about the English literature with abundant Chinese images, Maugham's famous travel book *On a Chinese Screen* will surely be mentioned. As a representative work reflecting Maugham's view of China and the historical background at that time, it is deeply influenced by Orientalism. Because of the influence by the prevailing Orientalism, Maugham made series of exaggerated fantasies and sighs of Chinese landscapes, as well as showed a distinct sense of racial superiority to the Chinese people in his masterpiece *On a Chinese Screen*.

## 2. THE BACKGROUND OF ORIENTALISM

First of all, there is a close relationship between Yellow Peril and Orientalism. Yellow Peril emerged at the end of the 19th century, which originated from the Western colonialists' fear that the industrious Chinese would subvert the whole European society. It demonstrates the uglification and demonization of yellow race. The Orientalism that this paper will analyze is the further extension of the Yellow Peril. According to Said, Orientalism is a biased way of thinking or cognitive system in which Westerners despise oriental culture and make up oriental culture arbitrarily[1]. He also pointed out the prejudice and fantasy of the West towards the East, that East is almost a place created by Europeans "out of thin air", which has been representing an "exotic sentiment" since ancient times[1]. This had a great influence on Maugham's view of China, and he also created a series of images of Chinese literature with this view, which were mainly manifested in the grand classical Chinese scenery and the lowly Chinese people.

## 3. EXAGGERATED IMAGINATION AND SIGN UNDER ORIENTALISM

### 3.1. Ancient China—figment of Maugham's imagination

Maugham savored China with Orientalism mentality. The Chinese landscapes he depicted have a strong classical style:

When you enter the city, you walk on a narrow street row upon row of shops: many wooden shops have their exquisite lattice structure and are resplendent. Those exquisite carvings show a unique decline of prosperity. You will imagine that in those dark niches, there are all kinds of mysterious oriental treasures.[2]

Behind these series of magnificent imaginations is Maugham's interest in the magic and mystery of the East disappearing in the dusk, he came to China to look for the "ancient customs and lingering charm"[3]. This typical Orientalism is deeply rooted in Maugham's writing style. Deng also asserted that the Chinese images in Maugham's mind is the "dome of Han Dynasty" and the "style of Tang and Song Dynasty"[3]. Based on these, the representation of exaggerated and classical Chinese landscapes is undoubtedly the concentrated embodiment of Maugham's Orientalism.

### 3.2. The myth of ancient China intensifies Maugham's prejudice against modern China

On the other hand, Maugham came to China to find the charm of ancient times. He was interested in historical China but almost no enthusiasm for the May 4th Movement, which just past and changed Chinese destiny. We can see Maugham's inner thought from a dialogue with a somber Cabinet minister in this travel book: One kind of

culture, the oldest world-famous culture, has been violently swept away. The Chinese overseas students are ruthlessly trampling on the things accumulated since ancient times. They don't love their country, neither believe in it, nor respect it... Until now, their beauty has nothing but in people's memory[4]. On the surface, it demonstrates that Maugham was sad about the devastation of ancient Chinese civilization. In reality, he missed the classical China in his mind. According to Zhou, this is an exclamation of exotic sentiment by virtue of his "cultural superiority"[5]. It is because of Maugham's sense of superiority over China that he regarded other nations as a "other" who could not be compared with himself or equal to himself. This is a kind of mentality just to meet someone's "curiosity", that is, see hats in Korea or see clogs in Japan, regardless of the current situation and future of these countries. This is a typical "Orientalist ideology"[6]. Hence, when Maugham found out that the brand-new China destroyed and adjusted the past he was interested in without satisfying his servitude. He would have enough misunderstanding and bias, thought that all these changes were heartbreaking and ruthless. Collins also claimed that the new face of modern China has upset Maugham's sense of superiority. He feared China with *Yellow Peril*[7]. Under the influence of these factors, Maugham was bound to lament the change of Chinese landscapes and averse to the change of China.

#### **4. RACIAL SUPERIORITY TO THE CHINESE PEOPLE UNDER ORIENTALISM**

##### ***4.1. Maugham's Orientalism – arrogance and bias based on Western superiority***

In this composition of Maugham, the Orientalism is also reflected in the Westerners' sense of racial superiority to the Chinese. Maugham called Chinese coolie "The Beast of Burden" and thought these overburdened Chinese people were novel: Look at those coolies. Each of them has a shoulder pole on his shoulder and a bundle of things on both ends. They form a pleasant picture[8]. Here, Maugham is a spectator, while Chinese coolies are the people to be watched. Said further pointed out that Europeans are the spectators, using their feelings to "look down on" the East[9]. Maugham did not regard Chinese coolie as a man like him and expressed sympathy as well as regret for their tragic fate. As an outsider, he enjoyed the interest and felt comfortable. There was the "White Superiority" behind it[10]. In his thinking structure, Westerners are rational and chaste, while Orientals are irrational and degenerate.

##### ***4.2. The derivation of Western superiority theory -- Orientalism***

The imprint of this sense of racial superiority is also shown in the *Henderson* chapter of the travel book: humane Mr. Henderson said that we should not care about the Chinese people. We are here because they fear us, we are the ruling race[11]. In his speech and behavior, the white superiority theory and the colonial mentality that only white people can rule the earth are clearly revealed. According to Deng, the concept that it is a privilege to "manage and occupy other nations" was deeply rooted in the Westerners' mind at that time, which also had a great impact on Maugham's values and writing style[12]. Based on aforesaid researches, it is not hard to understand why Maugham was arrogant to the Chinese.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

In the travel book *On a Chinese Screen*, Maugham made fantastic imagination and laments about China, as well as full of arrogance to the Chinese under the impact of Orientalism. In order to understand the peculiar Chinese images in Maugham's works, we must contact the social background and ideological trends at that time. These phenomena had a close relationship with the success of British Industrial Revolution and Chinese sudden turn for the worse. The rise of the British Empire promoted the ideology of racial superiority and the prevalence of Orientalism, which was reflected in the British literature in the same period. With these multi-layered comprehensions, it will also help us to eliminate prejudice and discrimination as well as carry out intercultural research.

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