KNOWLEDGE AND POWER IN A CHINESE POST(SEMI)COLONIAL CONTEXT

Павел Петков

An important part of postcolonial critical discourse – which originated in the work of Michel Foucault and which I find rather useful for analyzing the images of China produced by twentieth-century travel writers – is the complex relationship between *knowledge* and *power*. Foucault himself declares that one of the main goals of his archaeological endeavors is "to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible" (Foucault 1973, xxiii) and develops the argument that power and knowledge are invariably and inseparably connected in a way that is by no means innocent. To Foucault, knowledge always bestows to its bearer a certain kind of power over the entity that is being 'known' or over the very discourse that produces 'truths' about this entity. "[P]ower and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1973: 27). The two notions clearly depend on each other: they seem to be indispensable parts of the same discursive paradigm. Said states that "[k]nowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control" (Said 1978: 36).

This symbiotic relationship appears to be subject to interpretation by contemporary critics. One problematic aspect is that the very word 'power' suggests coercion or domination. Some theorists – such as Said – evidently assume that this is indeed the proper interpretation of the Foucauldian concept. The mechanism – suggested in *Orientalism* – through which the West dominates and exploits the Orient with the aid of various knowledges provided by scholars and writers of fiction, seems to provide a confirmation of this opinion, especially if we take into account Foucault's own statement that "[k]nowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (1996: 247). However, there is more to Fucauldian

power than simple domination. The French philosopher describes it as all pervasive and, more importantly, spreading not from top to bottom but coming from all directions of society. "Foucauldian our is not domination. It is the complex network of acts of domination, submission, and **resistance**... [It is] made up of individuals being dominated... and of individuals **resisting** domination [my emphasis]" (Prado 2000: 37). Leela Gandhi adds that power is often not coercive but seductive, observing that in the Foucauldian sense of the word it is "always already" everywhere (14). This 'seductiveness' frequently leads to "an idealisation [of the West] and a desire to be adopted by it" (Kostova 1997: 20).

As was pointed out above, the applicability of the 'knowledge-power' relationship in the critical analysis of Chinese images in western travelogues is extremely high. Again and again, twentieth-century travel writing about China demonstrates that a certain amount of knowledge about Chinese history, culture and/or language seems to empower the Western observers to pass what they see as 'objective' judgments on the people they meet and on the various cultural customs they witness. Colin Thubron, for instance, whose best-selling book *Behind the Wall* will be discussed at length later, is almost obsessed with the Chinese "Cultural revolution" (1966-1976). His apparent 'knowledge' of this traumatic period seems to give him the "intellectual authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 19) – as well as the moral right – to lecture the people he meets on their historical legacy and to express a noble and condescending indignation when his interlocutors voice their disagreement with his British point of view. The author, moreover, frequently blames their disagreement on their lack of factual knowledge. In addition, the seductive side of power, mentioned above, is easily detectable in most late twentieth-century travelogues, especially in those produced during the 1980s, when the Chinese people were finally allowed to strive for material wealth but did not have the economic means of acquiring it. As evidenced by the numerous texts, this widespread and frustrating situation frequently infuses the communication between the travel writers and the Chinese with a sense of craving on the part of the latter.

The concept of 'intellectual authority'[1] is extremely relevant in the context of travel writing about China and seems to be particularly important to Said. Throughout *Orientalism* he seems to argue that such an authority over the Orient cannot be morally claimed by anyone whose social roots

are not in the East. It still remains, however, to be explained how exactly the very assumption of intellectual authority serves any imperialist political ends.

Said seems to imply that achieving the right to claim such an authority – "the authority of the discourse" (Pratt 1992: 125) – has been a major purpose of the Europeans and North Americans writing about the Orient, from their appearance to the present day. This, however, could only be true if one takes it for granted that they – the writers – have a dishonest agenda: just being in a position to assume intellectual authority over something does not provide any benefits to the person who assumes it. There is a subtle but important difference that needs to be noted here. I refer not to the accumulated knowledge and subsequent 'understanding' of the subject but rather to one particular result of this accumulated knowledge – the right to say "I am in a position to make judgments in this area" – a right which is almost invariably assumed by those writing about China, however different their backgrounds or approaches may be. The cosmopolitan outlook, adopted by authors such as Hesler and Salzman, and rejected by Theroux and Evans, hardly makes any difference in this respect: both modes of image construction are based on such an assumption. This right has no value in itself and would hardly matter to a China-obsessed enthusiast, whose goal is to 'understand' and possibly explain to his/her contemporaries the people and culture of this country. Robert Irwin, in his book *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* argues that the majority of the Orientalists of the past centuries belonged to this latter type.

If, on the other hand, the traveler does wish to represent the Orient in a light that would favor the interests of their country, they could use their authority to manipulate the way a particular Western society views the countries of the East. They could achieve this by presenting these countries in whatever light they wished. In this case Said is well justified in writing: "Knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently, without comment, from one text to another. Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously, they are repeated without attribution; they have literally become *idĕes reçues*" (1978: 116). It is not difficult to see that the intellectual authority of the European, with which Said is very concerned, is not inherently a goal of the image-creating textual discourse, but, rather, its by-product, which, incidentally, could be used by some to serve political ends. It cannot be denied that such a

combination between assumed authority (generated by acquired 'knowledge') and political partiality could lead to a creation of images generating extreme and aggressive attitudes in a particular society.

In December 1860 *Punch* published a cartoon representing a European warrior on a horse, delivering a deadly blow to an ugly, disfigured, slant-eyed dragon. The caption read: "What We Ought to Do in China". This instigation was a direct result from the damning images, produced by 'authoritative' writers, which had circulated for decades in English society. Such extreme examples are not very typical of the following century but one can easily discern the same basic 'truth'-creating process at work in the texts of most twentieth-century travelers writing about China.

Present-day postcolonial criticism also pays significant attention to the "forms of discursive authority" (Pratt 1992: 162), overtly relating them, in most cases, to the 'power-knowledge' relationship. Lisle, in particular, is always on the lookout for potential political implications of even the most innocent-looking images produced by contemporary travelers. She insists that in the majority of the cases the travel writers use their stasis of 'outsiders' to assume moral (as well as intellectual) authority over the Orient. "The authority of the travel writer was enabled principally by their exteriority: the morality of the author was placed outside the Orient in order for him (and less often her) to speak for it, represent it and make it visible to the West" (2006: 89). She also points out that over time "discourses acquire the authority of truth" (2006: 23). We see these points repeatedly illustrated by the images of China produced by various travel writers. Even Edgar Snow, who is all but mesmerized by the awe-inspiring figure of Mao Zedong, occasionally finds it appropriate to pronounce veiled moral judgments of the Chinese people he meets. The travelers who assume the cosmopolitan outlook are hardly different in this respect. Indeed, Lisle argues that those authors have the potential to do even more damage than their openly denigrating colleagues, such as Paul Theroux and Polly Evans, because the stereotypes they (re)produce are disguised as comments of impartial and/or benevolent observers.

When they wish to increase their own authority and the extent to which the images they have produced are regarded by the readers as 'truth', the authors of Chinese travelogues frequently switch between different modes of representation. This particular mechanism has been noticed and discussed by Rob Nixon in his book *London Calling: V.S.*

Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin. Nixon claims that V.S. Naipaul resorts to two such modes: "a semiethnographic, distanced, analytic mode and an autobiographical, subjective, emotionally entangled mode", in order to "maximize his discursive power by alternating between these forms of authority in a manner that is made to seem expressive of a quasi-global identity that contains both First and Third worlds" (Nixon 1992: 15). This switch can be observed in the Chinese travelogues of most Western travelers. It is particularly conspicuous in Thubron's *Behind the Wall* and less so in, say, Hessler's *River Town*. In both cases, however it does seem to strengthen the illusion of authority by emphasizing the comprehensiveness of the author's experience.

In the Foucauldian framework, not only does knowledge create power and does power *require* more knowledge. Power is also able to **create** knowledges. "The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information... [I]t perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Foucault 1996: 52). The last part of this statement is classic Foucault but the section about power **making** knowledge is also significant, especially in a postcolonial context. It is a well-established contention in contemporary critique that the producers of textual discourse are in fact producing or 'constructing' the very object they are concerned with. Because, as published authors, travel writers in China have the power to convey to a great number of people what they have seen, they become, in effect, producers of 'knowledge'. This knowledge, in turn, becomes part of a perceived 'truth' about the country. "Power is reproduced in discursive networks at every point where someone who "knows" is instructing someone who doesn't know. It gives an added dimension to the notion that the personal is political because it seems that power relations are sustained at every level" (Gunew 1990: 22). What the author has done has been to create a tapestry of images which have mostly come out of his 'background books'. In this way the author practically constructs what he is describing and creates the illusion that there exists an easily definable and conveyable China.

[There is not] such a thing as a real or true Orient... "[T]he Orient" is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically "different" in-habitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea. (Said 1978: 322)

This is one of the central assertions in *Orientalism* and if not taken to an extreme it can serve as an invaluable strategy for deconstructing travel narratives about China. Foucault argues that power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. In this case Foucault is talking about creating a particular type of subjects in a European context but this type of production can clearly be seen in the mechanisms of image production in twentieth-century travel writing about China. We should have in mind, however, that the process of difference-production in a Chinese context cannot be the same as the one active in Europe, where, as Foucault tells us, 'abnormal' individuals were defined, created and committed to the category of the Other so that the state would be able to police them (Loomba 2008: 49). This mechanism of difference-construction by Western travelers in China functions by necessity in a different way, because the Chinese people are already defined as different. We could easily apply to China Megan Vaughan's comment that "the need to objectify and distance "the Other" in the form of the madman or the leper was less urgent in a situation in which every colonial person was in some sense, already 'Other'" (10).

This apparent difference between the European and colonial context has led some critics to declare Foucault's notion of power inapplicable in the area of postcolonial studies. Such an outright rejection, however, is hardly recommendable since it deprives us of the ability to apply even those aspects of the Foucauldian model that *do* fit the postcolonial situation and takes away a valuable analytical tool. It should not be forgotten that the knowledge-power relationship is characteristic of the human condition in general, and therefore the colonial or semi-colonial one cannot be excluded.

At the same time, as Said himself repeatedly stresses, Focault's model can, to a certain degree, hinder the grasp and the analysis of the Orient-accident interaction. "[D]espite the extraordinary worldliness of his work, Foucault takes a curiously passive and sterile view not so much of the uses of power, but of how and why power is gained, used, and held onto" (Foucault 1983: 221). Such a conception of power "has drawn a circle around itself, constituting a unique territory in which Foucault has imprisoned himself and others with him" (Said 1983: 245). As a consequence, almost no room is left for criticism. As Alan Ryan points

out, "[It is] suicidal for embittered minorities to embrace Michael Foucault, let alone Jacques Derrida. The minority view was always that power could be undermined by truth… Once you read Foucault as saying that truth is simply an effect of power, you've had it" (qtd. in Sokal and Bricmont 1998: 270). Mainly for this reason, I avoid using 'power' as something completely amorphous, all pervasive and multi-directional: Such a concept would be essentially unopposable, both on a political and a theoretical level. If we assume that knowledge produces power, then this power must be exercised by someone over someone else – which is one of Said's main contentions. The discursive context of travel writing about China, produced by Westerners, seems to support the Saidean understanding of the concept, according to which power **is** closely related to domination after all. It could even be argued that this relation is retained even when the traveler, writing about China, is completely unaware (or even denying) that he or she is exercising knowledge-engendered power. Foucault's words represent an almost perfect definition of this type of unconscious domination.

As far the 'knowledge-power' relationship and the production of difference are concerned, an important detail needs to be mentioned in relation to the travel accounts of China. For various reasons – not least of which is the sheer remoteness and relative inaccessibility of the country – the image/knowledge production mechanism at work in some of these accounts results in the construction of notions which suggest that there is such a thing as "a Chinese mind" and that this mind is essentially different from the European one (which is, by default, also represented as an objectively existing entity). This imagined essential difference is at times so substantial that it often makes the Chinese – even in contemporary travelogues – look as if they perceive the world in a profoundly different way. Sometimes the reader is even left with the impression that the categories through which the Chinese systematize their 'reality' would be incomprehensible to a Westerner. Colin Thubron's name automatically comes to mind here, but we can find traces of this tendency in a great number of accounts. Because of its tenaciousness through the ages, this notion has largely achieved the status of 'knowledge'.

Apparently, this impression can be created with the aid of a few known facts about a foreign land, but it can also be invented on the basis of information, which has been completely and consciously made up. It

would seem that when it comes to constructing a satisfying and comfortable image of the Other in one's mind, it matters little whether the 'knowledge' about this Other is 'real' or not. In the preface of *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault cites a passage taken from Jorge Louis Borges's essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins". In this essay Borges draws a rough comparison between Wilkins's attempt to create an artificial language and the fantastic classification of animals in a certain Chinese encyclopedia – *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*:

The animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (Borges 2000: 103)

This classification is significant not with its novel and extravagant way of approaching zoology but because it provides a valuable insight into an alien model of dealing with the surrounding reality. According to Foucault, it completely destroys established models of thinking and ways of perceiving the world. It also questions the distinctions between Self and Other – distinctions which were made a long time ago by the society of the Self and have enjoyed a long life through the ages. What is more, its apparent incomprehensibility demonstrates not so much an absurdity in itself, as an inherent inability of "our" mind to even think about a way of classification fundamentally different from our own taxonomic models. Foucault observes that such a classification "threaten[s] with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" and that "the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (1966, xvi). What the French theorist is in effect writing about here is differing modes of knowledge (or epistemes).

On the other hand, no matter how energetically Foucault may insist that this classification demonstrates a profoundly different way of thinking, a skeptical reader can hardly be mislead into believing that the passage is genuine. "Though [Borges] mentions as his source Dr. Franz Kuhn, a German sinologist and translator of Chinese literature, and even gives the title of that "Chinese encyclopedia"…, [it] is nonexistent except in his own invention" (Longxi 1988: 111). It is sufficient to take one quick glance

at the Chinese (or any other oriental) society to arrive at the obvious conclusion that Borges was making things up. The point is that a society capable of producing such a bizarre taxonomic system would have a general way of thinking so profoundly different from the Western, that its perception of the world, with all its conflicts, laws and mysteries, would be entirely alien to any westerner. It does not take much intellectual effort to realize that such an alien mindset would result in the formation of a society, separated from the rest of the world by an uncrossable cultural abyss. Every aspect of such a society would be completely incomprehensible to the outsider: the government system, the laws, the customs, the arts, and especially the moral and ethical values. Societies which differ so profoundly in their way of perceiving the Cosmos, could hardly establish any peaceful contact and maintain any kind of relationships.

This, of course, is hardly the case. Chinese society may have been very different from the societies in the European countries, but not *that* different. In spite of the cultural, political, philosophical and religious discrepancies, the Oriental and the Occidental societies have always demonstrated similar ethical values, superstitions, society structuring, crowd behavior, etc. Theft, murder, rape and treason are considered bad both in China and in Europe. Bravery, honesty and kindness are universally recognized virtues. "Foucault may be a great social theorist, but he has little understanding of Borges's topsy-turvy world where the fantastic and the real change places, where things are turned inside-out, where stories exist within stories and things repeat themselves endlessly" (Obeyesekere 1992: 218). In his article "The Future of Indexing" Jan Wright observes that if the actual cultural differences between China and the West were so profound, our categories of tasks and concepts may not make any sense to them. This is precisely what would have happened if the passage from the so-called *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* had been genuine, but in fact our "categories of tasks and concepts" do make sense to the Chinese people, just as their categories make sense to Europeans. The "monstrous unreason" (Longxi 1988: 110) turns out to be a Western invention.

However, insofar as every western observation about China – including those in travel literature – can also be viewed as an attempt at classifying and ordering of a frequently disturbing alien space, Borges's strange taxonomy *is* useful to keep in mind because it "makes us see that there is an arbitrary element in all classifications" (Birns 2010: 55).

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