

UMBERTO ECO'S 'BACKGROUND BOOKS' AND THE PROBLEM OF (UN)CONSCIOUS MISREPRESENTATION OF CHINA

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Резюме: Понятието „книги на очакванията” е създадено от Умберто Еко, за да обобщи вярванията на пътешествениците, убежденията им, стереотипите, очакванията, суеверията и пр., които са били вкоренени в съзнанието им от собствената им културна среда. Това понятие включва всяко предварително познание на авторите, както и това, което приемат за дадено. Пътуващите писатели неизменно прибягват до условности и предварително утвърдена информация, когато се опитват да „разгадаят” някоя чужда държава. Това, което се появява в пътеписите им, почти никога не е безпристрастно отражение на това, което те виждат, а е комбинация от очаквания, клишета, предварителни нагласи. Налага им се да се съобразяват и с очакванията на своите бъдещи читатели. Книгите на очакванията неизбежно влияят върху съзнанието на всеки пътешественик и го карат да види това, което той/тя очаква да види. Пътешествениците знаят предварително какво ще открият, защото тяхното предварително „познание” им казва какво би трябвало да открият. Как те възприемат това, което откриват, е под силното влияние на техните невидими книги на очакванията.

When writing about representations of China, it is important to mention a theoretical concept that is being heavily used in contemporary postcolonial critique under various names and which has been rather aptly dubbed by the philosopher Umberto Eco ‘background books’ (1998, 53). Eco forges the term while discussing about Marco Polo’s travels in the Far East and his encounters with “things” which he could not even think, let alone attempt to understand. When the traveller stopped in Java he reported he had seen a unicorn. Save for the presence of a horn on top of its muzzle, the real animal was quite different from the popular descriptions of the mythic creature. However, according to Eco he was simply unable to do so because of what the critic calls “background books” or “encyclopedias” he was carrying with himself.

[W]e travel with preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition... [We] travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover. In other words, the influence of these background books is such that, irrespective of what travelers discover and see, they will interpret and explain everything in terms of these books. (Eco 1998, 53)

Polo was unable to make a radical change in the mosaic of the world he had already constructed for himself, by introducing a completely unknown species of animal into it. Instead, he chose to see the rhinoceros through the prism of his prior “knowledge” and turn it into something that he was certain belonged in an exotic, oriental land: a unicorn. He noted that the beast he had found was very different from its popular image in Europe but instead of seeing the Other what it was, he ‘made’ it. The process of making, or ‘producing’ China is not at all limited to centuries-old texts but can be observed, in a modernized version, in twentieth-century accounts.

This concept is extremely important for a rigorous critical analysis of the images of China produced by twentieth-century Western authors, one of the reasons being the fact that those authors were obliged to carry a heavier and more cumbersome load of background books than any other generation of travelers before. If Marco Polo’s ‘encyclopedias’ were incomparably lighter and he still fell prey to what they taught him, it is easy to imagine the extent of the preconditioning of a modern traveler’s mind. The term stands for every traveler’s beliefs, assumptions, stereotypes, expectations, superstitions etc., which have been installed into their mind by their own cultural environment. It also includes any previous ‘knowledge’ they might have as well as what is taken for granted. It is invariably the case that travel writers make use of conventions when they present a particular country. What they write in their accounts is not the way they see things in a straightforward way: they make use of conventions, they bring baggage with them, and they also think in terms of the expectations of their reading public. Their narratives are *mediated*. This is what Pallares-Burke has in mind when she writes that one cannot even attempt to understand a foreign culture, or one’s own, “without a more or less coherent system of concepts” (141). Those books have inevitably conditioned every traveller’s mind to perceive what he/she expects to perceive. The travelers know in advance what they are about

to discover because their prior knowledge is telling them what they are expected to discover. How they perceive what they discover is heavily influenced by their invisible background books.

In his book *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger addresses the same phenomenon, only he calls it ‘fore-having’. Every attempt at interpretation, he contends, “is grounded in something we have in advance – in a *fore-having*” (1977, 191). This leads to a peculiar act of ‘understanding’ in which appropriation plays an important role. “When something is understood but is still veiled, it becomes unveiled by an act of appropriation, and this is always done under the guidance of a point of view, which determines that with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted” (Heidegger 1977, 191). One can hardly find a Western text containing images of China where this combinatory mechanism of ‘understanding’ through appropriation with the aid of the author’s “background books” (or fore-having), is not almost perfectly illustrated. It is quite significant that while some authors of Chinese travelogues seem to be aware of this process and even discuss it openly (such as Peter Hessler and Mark Salzman), this does not appear to decrease the influence exercised by their background books on the images of China they construct.

An important theoretical point that needs to be addressed is related to the not-so-obvious but fundamental discrepancy between Eco’s “background books” theory and the postcolonial claim – popularized by Said – that a great part of the imagological sins, perpetrated by westerners writing about the Orient, is the result of **conscious** misrepresentation. It must be categorically stressed, however, that insofar as both stances assume either conscious or unconscious (mis)interpretation, they discuss the Orient as an objective, ‘real’ entity. This needs to be pointed out because of one particular recurring instability in the framework of contemporary postcolonial critique, going back as far as *Orientalism*, and rooted – even further back – in Giambattista Vico’s *New Science*: the alternating perception of the East on the one hand as a complete construct, and, on the other hand as an objectively existing, describable space. In his book *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (1998) Allastair Pennycook comments on this disparity:

A central problem that has been raised by a number of writers concerns Said’s ambivalence about whether he is discussing Orientalism as a *misrepresentation* of ‘reality’... or whether he is dealing only with Orientalism as system of

representation (i.e. the Orient is a construct of the discourse of Orientalism and thus there cannot be a question of misrepresentation). While Said often claims to be dealing with the latter, he is often tempted into talking in terms of the former... (Pennycook 167)

According to Clifford, this type of discourse “vacillates between, on the one hand, the status of an ideological distortion of lives and cultures that are never concretized and, on the other, the condition of a persistent structure of signifiers that... refers solely and endlessly to itself” (260). This, in turn, forces the critic to resort to tautological statements, such as Said’s “frequent comment that Orientalist discourse ‘orientalizes the Orient’” (Clifford 260). It follows that every time one speaks of ‘(mis)representation’ of China, he/she is referring to a ‘real’, observable China. According to Kostova, in a critical analysis this difficulty could be avoided “by emphasising the ‘constructedness’ of the images... and by moving away from the traditional categories of truth and objectivity” (1997, 19).

On the surface, it would appear that Eco’s and Said’s opinions come rather close on this particular point (about the background books). Both critics assert that a representative of the Western Self is inherently unable to see the Other as it is, deforming and misrepresenting it instead. However, this similarity is superficial. If we take a closer look at the implications of their separate claims, we shall notice that in reality they contradict one another. According to Eco, the misrepresentations made by Westerners are involuntary. They are an unconscious by-product, so to speak, of people’s effort to keep their world undisturbed by changes and new additions. The writers generally do not aim at distorting the image of the Other in order to serve the political and colonial purposes of their own societies. They are simply victims of their prior ‘knowledge’, derived from the background books they are forced to carry wherever they go. In the eyes of their readers the Other appears more exotic, different and disturbing than it might actually be, but this is only the result of the traveling authors’ own ignorance.

Often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact (Eco 2000, 57)

The real problem of a critique of our own cultural models is to ask, when we see a unicorn, if by any chance it is not a rhinoceros (Eco 1998, 75).

Eco speaks of ‘reactions’ on the part of the Westerners and implies that they must make a deliberate, conscious effort, if they wish to see the Other clearly, without bias-induced distortions, and to realize that the unicorn is not a unicorn at all. The necessity for such an effort excludes any kind of ill-intention in the misrepresentation the Other, since, if we were drawing an inaccurate picture on purpose, we would have to be clear about what the alien country really was, in which case the acknowledgment facts such as “the unicorn is in fact a rhinoceros” would require no effort whatsoever.

Said, on the other hand, takes quite a different view. As was already mentioned, one of his major claims is that western Orientalism serves political and imperialist purposes because Orientalism itself is a “political doctrine willed over the Orient” (Said 1978, 204). To him, western authors pretended to give an objective and disinterested account of the Other but in fact intentionally served political ends and provided the intellectual tools for taking over and controlling the lands of the Orient. They, however, could not do that by means of one-sided misrepresentation because it could backfire and mislead badly the colonial states, depriving them, in effect, of the ability to maintain their control over the newly-acquired colonies. As Said points out, a case in point is the Viceroy of India – Lord Curzon, who writes:

Our familiarity, not merely with the languages of the people of the East but with their customs, their feelings, their traditions, their history and religion, our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East is the sole basis upon which we are likely to be able to maintain in the future the position we have won...” (Curzon 184)

To provide some useful factual information, Said claims, was one of the tasks performed by the Western authors. Naturally, this first task had to be undertaken by scholars who called themselves ‘orientalists’ (in the period before Said’s *Orientalism* turned this word into a pejorative). It is in this sense that he declares that every European, “in what he could say about the Orient” (1978, 204) is a racist and an imperialist. Put in another way, not only are all Europeans racist, but they also have no other option.

It is now taken for granted by many Western intellectuals that those orientalists indeed had much to feel guilty about. The sweeping success of Said’s book in the nineteen eighties gave rise to a powerful scholarly discourse which was greatly influenced by the new ‘intellectual fashion’.

This fashion tended to all but obliterate the differences between numerous independent studies, conducted by Western scholars from various countries. All of those studies, Said maintains, worked to the detriment of the East.

Since the Saidean perspective towards the western intellectual discourse and especially towards texts produced by Westerners and concerning the Orient has become classic and has demonstrated its analytical efficacy over the years, it would not make much sense not to adopt it as one of the analytical perspectives when one analyzes twentieth-century images of China produced by writing Westerners. This, however, should not be done uncritically. For instance, I do not accept Said's premise—mentioned above – that every European, writing about the East, was necessarily a racist and an imperialist, and I reject the notion that all image-producing travelers in China are willing participants in the schemes of their countries to fix China permanently in a neo-colonial situation. To justify this rejection, it is necessary to point out why, according to some opinions, Said's accusations towards the so-called Orientalists – including those writing about China – are not always fully justified. In some critics' view many of the travelers and scholars supplying the West with images of the Orient should not have been the object of Said's attack. If the information provided by them helped the colonialists to establish and maintain their authority in the Eastern countries, as Lord Curzon clearly suggests, this was not their responsibility.

Some critics argue that Said greatly overvalued the importance of oriental scholarly discourse for the rise of colonial empires, and overestimated its influence on politics. One of these critics is Robert Irwin. He argues that Said's book is "a work of malignant charlatanry in which it is difficult to distinguish honest mistakes from willful misrepresentations" (qtd. in Bebdad and Williams 299) and that it "has been surprisingly effective in discrediting and demoralizing an entire tradition of scholarship" (Irwin 276). In his book *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* he sets out to refute Said's misinterpretations (as he saw them) of the efforts of the Orientalists. For this purpose he sets up a powerful defense of Orientalism and gives a very detailed and exhaustive account of its history. He mentions a great number of people (some of whom were not exactly scholars) and explains how their work helped the West to dispense with many of its prejudices towards the East and become acquainted with the Eastern cultures. Irwin says that his book "contains many sketches of individual Orientalists – dabblers, obsessives, evangelists,

freethinkers, madmen, charlatans, pedants, romantics. (Even so, perhaps still not enough of them)” (7). In his opinion these people introduced the basic ideas of Asian cultures to the West. The author also describes the period when many East-obsessed enthusiasts traveled the Asian lands with the hope to come across new and insightful ideas.

Said maintains that Orientalism served as a mere tool (and justification) for the ventures of the imperialist countries, mainly England and France. However, as Irwin points out, the majority of the Orientalists were strongly anti-imperialist. They seldom wasted an opportunity to criticize Western colonial ambitions and to a great extent assumed the role of guardians of the interests of the Eastern societies they were studying. “There has been a marked tendency for Orientalists to be anti-imperialists, as their enthusiasm for Arab or Persian or Turkish culture often went hand in hand with a dislike of seeing those people defeated and dominated by the Italians, Russians, British or French” (Irwin 204). It can easily be maintained that these scholars and travelers were on the same side of the barricade as Edward Said. They did not want the East to be conquered by Western colonial powers any more than Said did. Significantly, authors of this category are ignored by Said because their works do not support his argument. Mary Wortley Montagu (1689 – 1762), for example, is not mentioned at all. The reason becomes obvious when one looks at the following comments about the Turkish people:

Sir, these people are not so unpolish'd as we represent them. 'Tis true their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better. I am almost of opinion they have a right notion of life; while they consume it in music, gardens, wine and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some scheme of politics, or studying some science to which to which we can never attain, or, if we do, cannot persuade people to set that value upon it we do ourselves.” (184)

Wortley Montagu “consistently rejects conventional Orientalism and relativises the differences between East and West” (Kostova 1997, 19). The same could be said about a number of those who traveled in China during the twentieth century and wrote about what they saw. What is more, the various categories of travelers, listed by Irwin, are almost equally applicable to them as they are to those creating images of the Middle East. Kerr argues that Said “seems to be struck with the residual

argument that whatever the individual goodwill of the scholars, they are all prisoners of the establishment. ... At best, this is a preconceived argument, and a highly debatable one” (qtd. in Sebrow and Rofle, paragraph 5).

Needless to say, the concept of the “background books” can be applied in any context, related to the study and description of a foreign culture. In Chinese context, however, it is particularly appropriate, not only because Eco coined in relation to Polo’s travels but also because it describes rather accurately the multitude of pre-conceptions most travelers to China bring with themselves.

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