

THE IDEA OF THE OTHER AND CHINA AS ITS ULTIMATE ILLUSTRATION

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“Men make their own history, [...] what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made” (Said 1995).

The fact that China has often been perceived as the ultimate Other may not be entirely due to its location, which, in itself is a good reason. For a long time after the contacts between Rome and China began, the journey along the Silk Road was hardly ever made by one single individual. Since Zhang Qian’s journey to the western lands, there had been a steady commercial traffic between the East and the West. The distance to be covered was enormous; the road ran through lands controlled by different peoples and the goods – usually Chinese silk – were usually transferred from one cart to another. Very few people actually went all the way from China to the Roman Empire, to give Europe first hand information about the exotic oriental lands. The result was almost complete ignorance. The Chinese knew next to nothing about the Romans they were trading with and the Romans thought that silk was a special kind of tree-like plant.

Speaking of the concept of Other, one can detect a certain amount of philosophical irony in the very reason why Zhang Qian undertook his famous voyage. He was sent in 137 BC by Emperor Wu-di, who was gravely concerned about the safety of his northern and western borders. The Xiongnu tribe was periodically raiding Chinese territories, wreaking havoc among the population. At that time, the Xiongnu were clearly perceived as the Other. The emperor sent Zhang in order to make an alliance with the Yueh-chih tribe who were supposed to live somewhere near the west Chinese border. He planned to attack the Xiongnu from two sides together and chase them off his territories. On a semiotic level, the Chinese empire was dealing with two different kinds of the Other: one that was openly hostile, and another, which

was largely unknown. To protect itself against the first Other, it had to dispense with the second, to appropriate it and to make it, in effect, part of the Self. Forming an alliance with a certain group of people would hardly result in anything else but the removal of this group from the sphere of the Other and placing it somewhere within the vague and unstable realm of the Self. The expected outcome was that the Other would become smaller, while the Self would become bigger and more powerful.

Zhang's military mission did not succeed. When he finally arrived in the land of the Yueh-chih, eleven years after he had started his journey, having been captured by the enemies and having spent ten years among them, he found that the would-be allies had entirely changed their way of life. They had settled in Bactriana (part of today's Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan), lived quiet lives and no longer wished to return to the East and fight with their former enemies. Zhang returned home thirteen years after he had started, thinking he had failed. What he did not realize, however, was that he had completed exceptionally well the more significant mission, underlying the military one – in spite of the unsuccessful negotiations, he had managed to appropriate the Other. He brought back to China invaluable knowledge about the way of life, history and culture of the lands he had traversed – in Central Asia and regions further west, as well as the Roman Empire. His expedition hugely facilitated the start of commercial and, inevitably, cultural relationships between China and the West. The Silk Road was open and there was no shortage of merchants willing to take it.

The above example seems to demonstrate that whether the Other will remain Other or will be appropriated by the Self, depends entirely on the Self's interest. Emperor Wu-di reasoned that the interest of his empire demanded part of the Other (the Yueh-chih) stop being Other. This appears to support Said's argument that people actually *invent* or *make* the Other when they need it for their own self-identification. In his opinion the process of "othering" has entirely subjective (or social) grounds and is not related to the actual cognizability or even penetrability of what is perceived as Other. What must remain alien is simply left out of the high walls, surrounding the Self.

Another reason is that, according to some great philosophers and thinkers, in order to complete the process of self-knowledge we need to use a special kind of crutch – the crutch of *differentiation*. We need to determine how exactly the Other is different from us and to find the final confirmation

of the Self in this difference. As Spinoza puts it, “Determination is negation” (50th letter from Spinoza to Jarig Jellis). This can easily lead to consoling but worthless fabrications made by our collective unconscious.

The alien must not be allowed to become familiar. However, as soon as the Other is not needed as such, the moment it is not essential for the self-identification and is excluded from the range of colonial or imperialistic ambitions, the attitude towards it changes easily. It no longer needs to remain other. It would logically, though somewhat paradoxically, follow from the Saidian model that such a process of appropriation would be relatively smooth and easy. The reason for this lies in Said’s and Foucault’s assumption that the Other (as well as almost everything else, if we add Derrida to the equation) is constructed and/or invented by a given society. If what is perceived as Other had been part of an objective reality, a multitude of actual facts, the process of appropriating it and turning it into part of the Self would be nearly impossibly difficult, since what is outside us (especially if it is out of our immediate reach, like the Orient) is much harder to understand, change and appropriate, than what has never been *but* part of us. Since, according to Vico and Said, the Other was invented, or simply *made* by ourselves, it follows that it has always been part of us and would easily be appropriated if that was our desire. Zhang Qian’s thirteen-year-long journey illustrates this mechanism. The Chinese empire no longer needed the Other, as represented by the Yueh-chih people, to remain other. On the contrary, it was in its direct interest to make it part of (or, at any rate, get it as close as possible to) its own Self. As a result, the emperor sent Zhang on a mission of appropriation and, granted that the traveller successfully reached his destination and afterwards returned home with the accumulated knowledge, his mission was a success, although he did not manage to negotiate an alliance.

In spite of Zhang’s trip and the established commercial connections between the East and the Roman Empire, China continued to be perceived as the ultimate other in the following centuries. The Xiongnu tribes remained in the region and even attempted to control part of the Silk Road. Interestingly, they once again happened to play a significant role in the development of the East – West relationships. In the 1st century AD the Chinese general Ban Zhao was sent to deal with them again. He managed to chase them off the Chinese borders and to free the trade route from their control. He then made the decision to make a direct contact with the Other, represented by Da Chien

(the Roman Empire), and sent Gan Ying, a military officer and ambassador, on a special mission, consisting of two tasks – the first task was to establish a regular communication with the Romans and to gather as much information as possible about the foreign lands he was going to traverse. The second, more important task, was to see whether it was feasible for the Chinese army to conquer the Roman Empire. Gan Ying set out in 96 AD, carrying luxurious gifts for the ruler of the foreign kingdom. However, he never made it to Rome. He reached Mesopotamia and prepared to cross the Indian Ocean but was told by the local people that this would be extremely difficult: “The sea is vast and great; with favorable winds it is possible to cross within three months, but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years. It is for this reason that those who go to sea take on board a supply of three years’ provisions. There is something in the sea which is apt to make man homesick, and several have thus lost their lives”. When he heard this, Gan Ying decided not to attempt to cross the ocean and went back. In fact, he was misinformed. The Parthians had no interest to facilitate the establishment of Roman-Chinese trade relationships, as their own trade might suffer from that. The ambassador was also told that the Roman empire was not some small kingdom to be easily overrun. Although he did not reach his destination, his journey had not been in vain. No Chinese person before him had gone so far west. According to the historical *Hou Han Shu (Book of Later Han)*, compiled in the fifth century, In the ninth year Ban Zhao sent his Subaltern Gan Ying, who probed as far as the Western Sea, and then returned. Previous generations never reached these regions. The *Shanjing* gives no details on them. No doubt he prepared a report on their customs and investigated their precious and unusual products (*Book of Later Han, Section 1*).

Gan Ying returned to his homeland, gathering all information he could. Although he brought back with him valuable knowledge about all the territories between his empire and the Indian Ocean, what was perceived as the ultimate Other remained a mystery. The first direct contact between China and Rome was not established until the second century AD, when the Romans came to control the Persian Gulf and Marcus Aurelius sent his own ambassadors to China.

The 18th century saw mainland Europe adopt a very favorable view of Chinese civilization in general. Sinophilia became very popular, especially

among the wealthier. Various goods imported from China became a symbol of good taste. Fine porcelain, for instance, was considered indispensable for anyone wishing to be regarded as a member of the “high society”. Other goods such as lacquer, silk and wallpaper, were also greatly admired and sought after. The 18 century European philosophers discussed Chinese society and even saw China as a “model nation”: well organized, cultured and stable. They also spoke highly of Confucius and his philosophy, comparing it very favorably to the other doctrines popularized by the European institutions and especially the Church.

If we look westward, however, and examine the writings of the British writers and intellectuals in the 18th century, we will notice quite a different tendency: 18th century England did not hold China in such a high esteem. On the contrary, the intellectual elite of the country considered the oriental empire to be stagnant, backward and barbarous. The English sinophilia had almost died out by the close of the previous century. Let us have a look at a passage, taken from Daniel Defoe’s *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. During one of his journeys the English traveller visits China and on his way to Nanjing (the capital city of Jiangsu province), he launches into a withering and scornful description of the Celestial Empire and its population:

When I come to compare the miserable people of these countries with ours, their fabrics, their manner of living, their government, their religion, their wealth, and their glory, as some call it, I must confess that I scarcely think it worth my while to mention them here. We wonder at the grandeur, the riches, the pomp, the ceremonies, the government, the manufactures, the commerce, and conduct of these people; not that there is really any matter for wonder, but because, having a true notion of the barbarity of those countries, the rudeness and the ignorance that prevail there, we do not expect to find any such thing so far off. Otherwise, what are their buildings to the palaces and royal buildings of Europe? What is their trade to the universal commerce of England, Holland, France, and Spain? What are their cities to ours, for wealth, strength, gaiety of apparel, rich furniture, and infinite variety? ...but the greatness of their wealth, their trade, the power of their government, and the strength of their armies, may be a little surprising to us, because, as I have said, considering them as a barbarous nation of pagans, little better than savages, we did not expect such things among them...

... They appeared to be a contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant, sordid slaves, subjected to a government qualified only to rule such a people; ... the Czar of Muscovy might with ease drive them all out of their country, and conquer them in one campaign; ... he might by this time have been Emperor of China, instead of being beaten by the King of Sweden (Defoe 241).

Seen through the frame of the Orientalist Critique, these passages are unspeakably offensive. The whole part of Defoe's book, dealing with Robinson Crusoe's trip to China, tastes of strong colonial militarism. The traveller gets completely carried away, forgetting that his potential reader would like to hear about these exotic things and telling them what rich and powerful countries they belong to.

Defoe's work is not exceptional and points to a trend in the 18th century English society. As Zhang Longxi observes, in the minds of the English facts and fiction became commingled and China, to them, was more legendary than real. For the English intellectuals it became a place available for all sorts of fantasies. China was universally stereotyped negatively.

Francis Bacon, on the other hand, had not resorted to quoting imaginary travel writers but he had also made observations about China, which can easily be described as Orientalist (in the Saidian sense). In particular, he talks about Chinese language and by applying what he perceives as logic, arrives at unflattering conclusions. He points out that the Chinese characters are not words or letters, but notions, which also characterizes the communication between primitive people who do not know each other's language and resort to pictures and drawings. He then writes that Chinese language must be very primitive too. This conclusion is absurd but it sounded convincing at the time because the English philosopher had on his side the pre-conditioned mind of the Europeans. He was making his argument in a point of history which, in a paradoxical way, can be regarded as both late and early. Late, because Bacon had behind his back centuries and centuries, during which the European mind had been aware of the existence of China; this awareness had been created by various authors in such a way that people inevitably regarded the empire as somewhat primitive and backward. In other words, they did not need Bacon, or any other sixteen-century thinker, to tell them that China was primitive. They already "knew" that. The foundations of this "knowledge" were laid by Hippocrates and Aristotle who were among the first to describe the Orient in terms which became so familiar to the Europeans centuries later.

The image of China as something fundamentally different from us still persists today. Many people still believe that we and the Chinese are *different* kinds of mammals, if you wish. When I returned from China, people routinely asked me “It’s a whole new world, isn’t it?” To which I reply, to their annoyance “No, it isn’t”.

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 quotes a fantastic classification of animals in a certain Chinese encyclopedia – “Celestial Empire 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 (Foucault 2001).

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.

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 misled into believing that the passage is genuine. 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.

Which, of course, is not the case at all. Chinese society may have been very different from the Western, 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 behaviour etc. Theft, murder, rape and treason are considered bad both in China and in Europe. Bravery, honesty and kindness are universally recognized virtues.

In his article “The Future of Indexing” Jan Wright observes: “Our categories of tasks and concepts may not make any sense to them” (www.writersua.com/articles/indexing_future/index.html). This is precisely what would have happened if the passage from the so-called *Celestial Encyclopedia of Benevolent Knowledge* had been genuine. In reality, however, the majority of our “categories of tasks and concepts” do make sense to oriental people, just as their categories make sense to westerners.

So Chinese society is different, but not that different. The very fact that we belong to the same species of animal should put us on our guard every time someone gets started on how different this or that society is from us.

One of the most common results of this process of othering is stereotyping. People like stereotyping foreign cultures and societies precisely because that is their way of dealing with what they perceive as Ultimate other. If they regard a certain country as similar to their own, they would not do this. People do not stereotype what is similar but what is different. The more different a particular society is considered to be, the more rampant stereotyping is.

And as I’m heading towards the conclusion of my paper, I will illustrate what I have just said with a few examples of common stereotypes.

Chinese people eat Chinese food.

Yes, of course Chinese people eat Chinese food! But do you even know what Chinese food is? Forget what you think you know from your local “Chinese” takeaway. Unless you’ve spent several years living in main-

land China, it's unlikely you have even a clue about Chinese cuisine. What's more, modern Chinese people in the cities also eat pizza, burgers, spaghetti, sandwiches, chocolate, and all sorts of real international cuisines, not only junk food. Visitors to China who can't use chopsticks, or have a phobia of rice, will have absolutely no problem feeding themselves!

Chinese people look the same.

This one is pure nonsense. If you spend 2-3 weeks in China you will see what I mean. But people take that at face value. And use it to make unfunny jokes.

Chinese people eat rice. That's similar to saying "Bulgarians eat bread".

This shows what nonsense people can be led to believe if they don't use their common sense and uncritically accept the idea that their may be an Ultimate other. The nature of human attitudes and convictions, however, is such, that any attempt to construct a hypothetical situation based on what those attitudes *should* be might eventually lead nowhere. The problem is that people generally find it very difficult to change their mind, even when (or perhaps especially when) they are mistaken. Admitting your mistake, even to yourself, demands integrity few people have. In the words of Carl Sagan, "If we have been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge — even to ourselves — that we've been so credulous. So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new bamboozles rise."

One might argue, of course, that this is only valid about individual people and not about societies in a constant process of change. It cannot be denied that the new generations gradually alter the beliefs of their predecessors and may not necessarily adopt their opinions, but attitudes change slowly. There is an excellent chance that what the parents believed, their offspring will believe as well, especially when it comes to something so faraway and intangible as the Orient. To realize one's error would probably not be such a difficult task if the "true" state of affairs was right in front of one's eyes. All that would need to happen would be for the scales to drop.

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