

FOREIGNNESS AND OTHERING IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S *ON A CHINESE SCREEN*

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From the very beginning of *On a Chinese Screen* China impresses with its unmistakable foreignness. The opening passage is characteristic of the writer's style and is extremely symptomatic of the way the country will be portrayed throughout the travelogue. The very first images with which the author presents us are images of exoticism, backwardness and dilapidation: "You come to the row of hovels that leads up to the gate of the city. They are built of dried mud and so dilapidated that you feel a breath of wind will lay them flat upon the dusty earth from which they had been made. A string of camels, heavily laden, steps warily past you" (Maugham 1922, 11).

As is to be expected, carrying his own cumbersome load of 'background books', he cannot escape seeing China through the eyes and through the imagination of a great number of Westerners who have been there before him. The images created by Maugham are characterized by unmistakable queerness and foreignness. China looks and feels ancient. The general feeling is that it has not progressed since ancient times and is a victim of stagnation. "The city wall, crumbling, old and crenellated, looks like the city wall in an old picture of some Palestinian town of the Crusaders" (Maugham 1922, 12). As usually happens when the author discusses the back-in-time aspect of a certain element of Chinese life, the sense of mysteriousness is never far away:

The driver sits with dangling legs on a shaft. It is evening and the sun sets red behind the yellow, steep, and fantastic roof of a temple. The Peking cart, the blind in front drawn down, passes silently and you wonder who it is that sits cross-legged within. Perhaps it is a scholar, all the learning of the classics at his finger ends, bound on a visit to a friend with whom he will exchange elaborate compliments and discuss the golden age of Tang and Sung which can return no more; perhaps it is a singing girl in splendid silks and richly embroidered coat, with jade in her black hair,

summoned to a party so that she may sing a little song and exchange elegant repartee with young blades cultured enough to appreciate wit. (Maugham 1922, 12–13)

The imagined scholar in the above passage must be a **classical** scholar about to discuss not anything modern or ‘progressive’ but history. He must be dwelling on the past, mourning its departure. This is a fairly clear case of romantic projection on the part of the narrator. As is quite evident, it is he who throughout the book is obsessed with the Chinese past and almost unable to reside in the present. As the night falls the mystery of the Orient is not dispersed but, on the contrary, is strengthened: “The Peking cart disappears into the gathering darkness: **it seems to carry all the mystery of the East**” [my emphasis] (Maugham 1922, 13). Orientalizing is especially strong in these first passages: “[The little shops] have a peculiar ruined magnificence, and you imagine that in their dark recesses are sold all manner of **strange wares of the fabulous East** [my emphasis]” (Maugham 1922, 12). The Orient is fabulous because it is supposed to be so and because this is what is expected of it. The narrator is not so much describing this scene as imagining it and translating it to his western readers who, in turn, will add a few pages to their own background books.

According to H. J. Lethbridge Maugham intended his sketches to be in the style of classical Chinese writing, although he himself had no knowledge of the language. Indeed, the whole book feels and reads like a piece of chinoiserie in a literary form – evidently, the author was largely under the influence of the popular craze for Chinese-style items that had held England in its grasp during the previous century. “Maugham was influenced, one knows, by what he believed was the tone and texture of classical Chinese writing, but he could not read Chinese” (Lethbridge 1922, ix). If this observation is true, the writer was influenced by what he **believed to be** the tone of classical Chinese writing. The misleading nature of such an assumption is all too evident because Maugham could not avail himself of original Chinese texts. He needed to rely on translations and translation means also creation, change, imagining and construction. It can be regarded as the first step towards Orientalizing and discursive distortion.

The narrator appears to be aware of the fact that a great many of the pictures he describes spring directly from his imagination. Indeed, occasionally he directly acknowledges this fact, stressing that imagination,

invigorated by the exotic – often streaming from this same imagination – plays a great role in his life of a traveler:

The water buffalo splashes sinister through the mud and his cynical eyes seem to ask what end has been served by this unending toil. An old woman goes by in her blue smock and short blue trousers, on bound feet, and she supports her unsteady steps with a long staff. Two fat Chinese in chairs pass you, and passing stare at you with curious yet listless eyes. Everyone you see is an incident, however trivial, sufficient to arouse your fancy for an instant. (Maugham 1922, 86–87)

Apart from being a huge piece of chinoiserie to be shared with his readers, China, it seems, helps Maugham achieve his artistic purposes, since he regards imagination as something absolutely crucial for an artist who seeks to obtain freedom. When you are an artist, he shares, “you can let your fancy linger”. He also notes, “Reverie is the groundwork of creative imagination; it is the privilege of the artist that with him it is not as with other men an escape from reality, but the means by which he accedes to it” (Maugham 1938, 54). With these words the author directly acknowledges that he creates images of China by means of his imagination. Imagination “affords [the artist] a delight in comparison with which the pleasures of sense are pale and it affords him the assurance of his freedom. One cannot wonder if sometimes he is unwilling to exchange its enjoyment for the drudgery and loss of execution” (Maugham 1938, 54). This “loss of execution” seems to be of particular importance in the case of *On a Chinese Screen* because a travelogue is supposedly saddled with the task to convey to its readers – with maximum precision – what the writer has observed and/or imagined.

As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, Maugham is relatively well disposed towards the Chinese people and China as a whole. Unlike some other authors (such as Paul Theroux) who seldom miss an opportunity to imply – or bluntly point out – how superior Western civilization is to the Orient, he attempts, at least on the surface, not to denigrate or essentialize China. This being said, there is a rather large number of instances where the images the English traveler produces are of markedly orientalist character. They strengthen and enhance some of the most popular clichés about the country, such as Chinese mysteriousness, inscrutability, backwardness and essential foreignness. I will now discuss

some of these instances, aiming to demonstrate that, as Lisle has concluded, and as Foucault's reasoning seems to suggest, it is of almost no consequence whether a particular travel writer has adopted a benign disposition and a cosmopolitan outlook: he/she is essentially incapable of avoiding stereotyping and reproduces the power relations characteristic of the colonial and postcolonial situation. It is true that, as Cordell has suggested, Maugham's irony is not as biting and tinged with sarcasm (Cordell 1961, 216) as that of some other writing travelers and that the book is "good-natured and generous" (Brander 1965, 83) but on quite a number of occasions China appears to be on the wrong end of it nonetheless.

In his book *The Summing Up* Maugham does not seem to be quite aware of the fact that he, too, is at times a victim of Western superiority complex. His words indicate that in his opinion he has disposed himself of all cultural arrogance:

In contact with all these strange people I lost the smoothness that I had acquired when, leading the hum-drum life of a man of letters, I was one of the stones in a bag. I got back my jagged edges. I was at last myself. I ceased to travel because I felt that travel could give me nothing more. I was capable of no new development. I had sloughed the arrogance of culture. (Maugham 1938, 128)

At the same time, he acknowledges the fact that he is inventing a large part of what he is describing – be it places or people, especially when it comes to strangeness and oddity: "I had never doubted that it was I who gave them [the people] the idiosyncrasies that I discovered in them" (Maugham 1938, 128).

One of the instances where the author engages in production of essential difference is in Chapter v – "The Cabinet Minister". By creating a contrast between what the Minister appears to be at first (a refined connoisseur of Chinese art) and what he 'in fact' is – an unscrupulous and cruel monster – the narrator underlines the essential foreignness of his interlocutor.

But to me the most charming part of it was that I knew all the time that he was a rascal. Corrupt, inefficient, and unscrupulous, he let nothing stand in his way. He was a master of the squeeze. He had acquired a large fortune by the most abominable methods. He was dishonest, cruel, vindictive, and venal. He had certainly had a share in reducing China to the desperate plight which he so

sincerely lamented. But when he held in his hand a little vase of the colour of lapis lazuli his fingers seemed to curl about it with a charming tenderness, his melancholy eyes caressed it as they looked, and his lips were slightly parted as though with a sigh of desire. (Maugham 1922, 26)

The revealing of the inhuman qualities of this art connoisseur is saved for the last paragraph of the sketch in order to amplify the effect of the surprise. It is not often that the motive of the cruel and devious Chinese finds its way into Maugham's travelogue but in this particular instance the author has apparently allowed himself to be influenced by the image of the educated and refined but evil Chinese created in the nineteenth century when a wave of immigrant Asian workers reached both Europe and the United States. Had the Cabinet Minister been living in the West during the 1920s, he could have easily passed for a real-life look-alike of the great fictional Chinese villains created by authors such as Rohmer and Doyle. All of these villains (Dr. Yen How, Quong Lung, Dr. Fu Manchu) are educated men, capable of appreciating art, literature and intellectual conversation but under this refined surface they are cruel, mercenary and lack scruples of any sort.

The same characteristics seem to apply to Maugham's cabinet minister. He is intellectual, does not lack education and can discuss ancient Chinese pottery for hours but in the end is revealed to be a merciless monster like his fictional counterparts. The only difference between him and the fictional characters is that he does not live in the West and does not wish to conquer it. Instead, he has found it appropriate to exercise his power and cruelty on his own people. The narrator emphasizes – perhaps unwittingly – the Chinese cunningness and potential to deceive an unsuspecting westerner. He makes it clear that had he not known of the minister's monstrous deeds, he would never have guessed them, judging by the gentle façade that his interlocutor displays.

In the same chapter, there is a subtle irony which makes itself evident in the description of the man himself and of the way he has furnished his office:

I glanced around the room. It had a green Brussels carpet, with great flowers on it, and round the walls were highly carved black-wood chairs... in bright gold frames, were oil paintings which in the nineties might very well have been exhibited in the Royal

Academy. The minister did his work at an American roll-top desk. (Maugham 1922, 24)

He bemoans the disappearing of “old China” and the younger generation’s carelessness for its values but at the same time has procured for himself various modern western items for his office.

He talked to me with melancholy of the state of China. A civilisation, the oldest the world had known, was now being ruthlessly swept away. The students who came back from Europe and from America were tearing down what endless generations had built up, and they were placing nothing in its stead. They had no love of their country... (Maugham 1922, 24)

The message here seems to be that, in the eyes of the narrator, the westernization of China has gathered momentum and has become inevitable, if even its nationalist opposers are succumbing to it (since the action takes place in 1919 or 1920, this minister was a member of the Nationalist Cabinet of Chiang Kai Shek).

Earlier in the same sketch, the traveler makes a remark indicative of his attitude towards Chinese arts, when compared to art in classical Europe. “We walked around the room and he showed me priceless porcelains, bronzes, and Tang figures. There was a horse from a grave in Honan which had the grace and exquisite modeling of a Greek work” (Maugham 1922, 24 – 25). This is one of several passages in *On a Chinese Screen* where he compares the standards of classical Chinese and European art. Almost invariably, European art is presented to be something of a paragon against which Chinese art needs to be measured. In this instance the horse from the Honan grave is worthy of admiration only because it comes close to the standards of Greek classical art. Maugham, in other words, who is so preoccupied with the idea of aesthetic freedom, as he himself repeatedly emphasizes in *The Summing Up*, is unable to judge the aesthetics of the Chinese work of art on its own terms. He needs to compare it to a western example to find value in it. It should be pointed out that this inclination rather jeopardizes the narrator’s quest for ‘freedom’. If he is incapable of appreciating Chinese art as it stands, without comparing it to the European schools, what freedom are we really talking about?

Another instance of unequal comparison between Chinese and Western art can be found in chapter LI, “The Fragment”. The chapter

begins with a strong orientalizing feature: ‘all Chinese like decorations’. “When you travel in China I think nothing amazes you more than the passion for decoration which possesses the Chinese” (Maugham 1922, 206). This is a clear instance of essentializing with a slight touch of infantilization: all Chinese are the same in their passion for decorations.

The pewter pot is enriched with a graceful design; the coolie’s rice bowl has its rough but not inelegant adornment. You may fancy that the Chinese craftsman does not look upon an article as complete till by line or colour he has broken the plainness of a surface. He will even print an arabesque on the paper he uses for wrapping. (Maugham 1922, 206)

There is little doubt that this passion for colors and patterns exists in the narrator’s imagination as part of his background books and that in this instance Maugham re-creates the standard way in which the Orient was viewed in the West in the early twentieth century: obsessed with ornaments, decorations and shallow aestheticism. The fact that this particular characteristic is attributed to **all** Chinese people is yet another indicator that the reader is dealing with a case of essentialism. I am using the word ‘shallow’ here because the aesthetics of Chinese art almost invariably fade into insignificance when compared with the European artistic tradition. What is more, although the Chinese are obsessed with decorations, in the narrator’s opinion their artistic efforts do not seem to go deeper than the surface and all Chinese painters commit one of the gravest sins in art: the lack of imagination. What appears to be artistic endeavor turns out to be unimpressive craftsmanship: “But though the Chinese take such careful pains to avoid fatiguing your eye”, the traveler argues, “in the end weariness overcomes you” (Maugham 1922, 208). It appears the Chinese art is not capable, after all, to of achieving the high purposes that are within the scope of ‘real’ art.

Their exuberance bewilders. You cannot refuse your admiration to the ingenuity with which they so diversify the ideas that occupy them as to give you an impression of changing fantasy, but the fact is plain that the ideas are few. The Chinese artist is like a fiddler who with infinite skill should play infinite variations upon a single tune. (Maugham 1922, 208)

The Chinese, the narrator seems to argue, lack artistic imagination. The essentializing nature of this comment can scarcely escape the attention

of the reader. No matter how hard the Orientals may try to achieve aesthetic perfection, they are unable to come close to the standard of the Western artists with their depth of vision and their refined sense for the original and the sublime. At this point there is no overt comparison, however. The narrator contents himself with stating that the Chinese can execute numerous variations of an idea but the ideas are few and, above all, unoriginal. They bring boredom and weariness to the senses.

The direct comparison between the two kinds of art comes a few lines later. Among the Chinese bronzes, pieces of fine porcelain and embroideries the narrator comes across a very different piece:

“But that is Greek,” I said, in surprise. . .

It was a fragment of no great importance, but it was Greek, and perhaps because I was surfeited with Chinese beauty it affected me strangely. It spoke in a tongue with which I was familiar. It rested my heart. I passed my hands over its age-worn surface with a delight I was myself surprised at. (Maugham 1922, 208 – 209)

He compares himself to a sailor who, after traveling for a long time in the seas of the Orient comes back to gloomy but familiar England and “finds himself once more in the dingy alleys of a Channel port. It is cold and grey and sordid but it is England” (Maugham 1922, 209). Never is the opposition ‘home - the Orient’ more strongly emphasized in *On a Chinese Screen*. The narrator’s thoughts are never far away from home, from England, but in this particular instance the sudden appearance of a western piece of sculpture brings out in him emotions very close to exultation. In an instant China disappears in his mind to give way to the soothing images of the home. The “dingy alleys of a Channel port” suddenly seem more attractive and beckoning than the land of Confucius, although it is exactly this land that the narrator has traveled to in order to find freedom, as he himself professes. Again, one might ask, what kind of craved freedom and what kind of escapism are we talking about if the symbolic image of a single piece of Western art in an exquisite Chinese collection can sway in the narrator’s thoughts and attitudes in such a manner?

It could possibly be argued that it is the very difference of the Occidental piece of art that causes this emotional change in the narrator’s mind, just as powerfully as its connection with the West: the sheer familiarity of it soothes him and, in a way, brings out the whole Chinese collection. In a country of very ancient culture – more than 6000 years – the Westerner is greatly struck by the ancient character of this Greek

piece, which is about 2000 years old. The traveler, however, does not content himself with this comment. His excitement gradually rises until he reaches something like an emotional climax. He can no longer think of the Chinese collection. He is in rapture with Western classical art and he sees the Parthenon.

There he [the Macedonian commander] had built a temple to Aphrodite and a temple to Dionysus, and in the theatre actors had sung the *Antigone* and in his halls at night bards had recited the *Odyssey*... What magnificence did that stained fragment of marble call up and what fabulous adventures! How long had the kingdom lasted and what tragedy marked its fall? Ah, just then I could not look at Tibetan banners or celadon cups ; for I saw the Parthenon, severe and lovely, and beyond, serene, the blue Aegean. (Maugham 1922, 210)

At this point the traveler is no longer in China, he no longer finds freedom there. He discovers his poetic freedom, at least in his mind, in this single piece of broken Greek sculpture, for which a Chinese collection provides an unassuming backdrop. Although the above fantasy is an image provoked by an object – symbolic carrier of Western civilization, it is also an image of China, although China itself is absent from it. To my mind, this is one of the cases where an absence speaks as loud as a presence, if not louder. China's absence in this case serves to emphasize the partial uselessness of the narrator's quest for freedom: he has come to China to be free and to immerse himself in a foreign culture, but a single piece of Occidental art sweeps Chinese culture aside and captures his imagination entirely. Freedom, it seems, can never be found where you are, but where you long to be. When the traveler was in England he longed for the freedom of China and now that he has arrived in China he exults in the imaginary picture, painted by his own mind, of an ancient Western conqueror who arrives in the land of Cathay and brings his Western culture to it, planting it in China's soil like seeds of civilization.

The prodigious power of the narrator's imagination, demonstrated in the passages quoted above, is frequently displayed throughout the book. A certain pattern can easily be detected in the manner in which the narrator deploys his imaginative prowess. He generally takes a random person or element from the Chinese landscape, describes briefly his/her/its physical appearance to his readers and then proceeds to imagine the history, the occupation and – very frequently – the thoughts and emotions of the

chosen object. The chapter “The Mongol Chief” is a case in point. The narrator sees a Mongol rider – quite possibly a tradesman – coming into town and is quick to switch on his imaginative faculties:

Heaven knows from what mysterious distance he had come... he seemed not to notice that others were traveling the pass... he was dressed in a black silk coat and black silk trousers thrust into his long riding boots with their turned up toes, and on his head he wore the high sable cap of his country. He held himself erect, riding a little ahead of his followers, proudly, and as he rode, his head high and his eyes steady, you wondered if he thought that down this pass in days gone by his ancestors had ridden, ridden down upon the fertile plain of China where rich cities lay ready for their looting. (Maugham 1922, 17 – 18)

The ordinary Mongol tradesman – as he seems to be – coming, most likely, with commercial purposes, is represented as the successor of an inscrutable Mongol chief who surveys China with predatory and ruthless eyes and ponders wistfully on the times when his ancestors looted the country. This is a clear instance of free imaginative translation on the part of Maugham, bringing to mind the important question of ‘Who is translating what and for whom?’ In this case Maugham is translating the figure of the Mongol rider for his Western readers who expect exoticism laced with beguiling historical references. With images like these, and in spite of his strong anticolonial and cosmopolitan attitudes, the writer possibly added a few pages to the great volume of the British imperial project because such images inevitably foster the notion of China as a land where semi-barbarous tribesmen still roam the land. It is only natural for a colonially-minded nation to see this as a sign of backwardness and as a beckoning gesture to go in and ‘civilize’ the country. One is reminded of Lisle’s remark that “the cosmopolitan vision embedded in contemporary travel writing and espoused by many liberal thinkers is not as emancipatory as it claims to be; rather, it is underscored by the remnants of Orientalism, colonialism and Empire” (Lisle 2006, 5). Just such remnants one can detect in the above passage. “In effect”, Lisle also writes, “travel writers currently articulating cosmopolitan visions of the world do not avoid the ‘embarrassing’ attitudes of their colonial predecessors _ they actually produce new forms of power that mimic the ‘previous sensibility’ of Empire” (Lisle 2006, 5).

More constructed images of extreme exoticism can be found later in the book, this time interspersed with notions of pure Oriental magic:

The street is shaded from the sun by great mats stretched from eave to eave; the light is dim and the thronging crowd has an unnatural air. You think that so must have looked the people in those cities of magicians which the Arab traveller knew, and where during the night a terrible transformation befell you so that till you found the magic formula to free you, you went through life in the guise of a one-eyed ass or of a green and yellow parrot. The merchants in their open shops seem to sell no common merchandise and in the taverns messes are prepared of things horrible for men to eat. (Maugham 1922, 88)

The first part of this passage contains a very curious comparison: on the one hand the narrator is firmly positioned in China, he travels there and records his observations about the people and the land. He admires Chinese art, draws sketches of Chinese coolies, workers and scholars, converses with western expatriates in China and comments on Chinese nature. On the other hand, however, his mind seems to wander off to Arabia which he seems to regard as a land of magic. By analogy, China also becomes a land of magic. From the excerpt it is not quite clear whether “those cities of magicians” are Arab cities or the same Chinese cities in a past historical time. It is also unclear whether the “Arab traveler” is supposed to be an Arab traveling in China or a Westerner passing through an Arab city. It seems more likely that Maugham is referring to an Arab in China who is traveling - in his imagination - along the Silk Road several centuries earlier. In both cases, however, the Orient is highly essentialized and endowed with magical qualities. The traveler has no ‘objective’ reasons to suppose that the city must have looked like this in a bygone magical age a long time ago but he is compelled, partly by his background books, to view and represent China as stuck back in time and unable to progress to a state of modernity. These are extreme images of the unnatural and magical character of China. The narrator needs to feel bewitched by a land that can cast spells and is able to turn him into “a green and yellow parrot”.

By reproducing of the above-mentioned stereotypes Maugham unconsciously contributes to the colonialist project. As Gandhi points out, “Orientalism becomes a discourse at the point at which he starts systematically to produce stereotypes about Orientals and the Orient, such

as the heat and dust, the teeming marketplace... the Asian despot, the childlike native, **the mystical East** [my emphasis]" (Gandhi 1998, 77).

Maugham was a product of Empire and, in a way, its chronicler. His aspirations, his desires, the texts he wrote and, even more significantly, what he omitted to write: all of this speaks loudly about the power relations within the Empire. In Said's view, representing the Orient as strange and obscure was one of the ways to justify the 'civilizing' mission of the Western countries: the white man's burden. Although Maugham does not make a conscious effort to forward this agenda, his unconscious participation in it could hardly be denied. He was an extremely popular writer and because of this the images of China he produced quickly became part of public discourse. Thus, the imagological significance of *On a Chinese Screen* cannot be greatly overstated. Regardless of what his desires might have been, the way the writer imagined China most probably contributed to the creation of an even more orientalized and essentialized discursive image of the Orient in the minds of many Westerners. As Dorothea Lawrence Mann notes, "all his Chinese impressions are there for the purpose of finding their bearing on the one big question of what the East means in its effect on other Englishmen" (qdt. in Jonas 1972, 106).

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