

The Construction of Chinese Image of Western Centralism in Maugham's the Painted Veil in the Context of Western Culture

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Abstract: The image of China in Western literature is a magnificent landscape. Maugham is a well-known British writer in the 20th century. Extensive foreign subject matter is a major feature of his work. He has traveled to China for several months and has written many novels involving Chinese subjects. The novel *The Painted Veil* is one of them. There are a lot of descriptions of China in *The Painted Veil*. The Chinese image in the work is not only a poor and backward colony, but also a paradise image that purifies the soul. By analyzing the Chinese image in Maugham's writing and the reasons for it, the author finds Maugham's ambivalent attitude and prejudice towards China. This article uses comparative literary image theory and Said's Orientalism theory. The contradictory Chinese images in *The Painted Veil* reflects the complex attitude of Maugham to Chinese and Western cultural exchanges. Furthermore, it reveals the archetype characteristics of western literature in constructing Chinese image. Image archetype features through a deep analysis of the image of China in Maugham's writing. We must adopt an objective and fair attitude in the treatment of heterogeneous cultural exchanges, while abandoning the sense of national superiority and national prejudice, and seeking a true balance between different nationalities and cultures.

1. Introduction

Maugham is known as “the British Maupassant”. His novels have a common theme: self-seeking and spiritual exploration. His novel *The Painted Veil* is a novel with Chinese background. The novel tells a story about love salvation: British woman Kitty accompanied her husband, Walter, a germ expert, to Hong Kong, China, and had an extramarital affair with Charlie, a colonial official, because she was dissatisfied with her husband's dullness. After Walter found out, he forcibly took her to practice medicine in Mei-tan-fu, where cholera was raging. In the end, Walter was killed by cholera infection, and Kitty re-understood the meaning of life because of this experience and put into a new life with a serene and peaceful attitude. There are a lot of descriptions of China in the novel, which have shaped many Chinese characters^[1]. These images are impregnated with Maugham's knowledge and attitude towards China. Since the 1990s, due to the rise of imagery studies in China, the Chinese image in *The Painted Veil* has also attracted much attention, which has aroused the interest of many researchers^[2]. From the perspective of iconography, we will analyze the complex attitudes of Maugham to China and the Chinese from the silent poor, the declining aristocracy and the Chinese characters of the British^[3]. Research is beneficial. The Chinese image in Maugham's *The Painted Veil* takes two forms. The “Chinese image” he shaped in the book hovered between ideology and utopia. It was ugly, inferior, mysterious and beautiful, full of idealistic colors^[4]. This article attempts to deeply analyze the Orientalist ideas hidden in the novel from the aspect of specific character portrayal, to look at non-Western culture through the perspective of the privileged perspective of Western centralism, and to analyze the root cause of the transformation of Maugham's description perspective, which will help us to interpret Maugham's complex feelings toward Chinese culture.

2. An Overview of Maugham's Work and Orientalism

2.1 Maugham's Creative Concept

Maugham lived in an era of pluralistic and turbulent British society. After the late Victorian and Edwardian period in Britain, he witnessed two world wars and felt the post-war economic depression and changes in people's thinking and changes in the times have also brought about in literary traditions^[5]. Such a background of the times has caused a great impact on Maugham's thoughts. These turbulences and anxieties are also reflected in Maugham's concept of creation. The turbulent society had a great impact on Maugham's literary creation. While literary creation, he also read the famous works of western philosophy. These western philosophical thoughts have a profound impact on Maugham's literary creation^[6]. Maugham also developed his own unique creative concept. Like the novelists of the same period, Maugham was unwilling to be constrained by tradition, and unwilling to follow the rules blindly. He believed that the creation of novels should focus on the spiritual world. Maugham's novel creation has experienced three stages of the loss of spiritual homeland, the loss of the value system, and the spiritual version, which reflects Nietzsche's dual meaning of positive and negative nihilism.

2.2 Research Status of Maugham's Works

Maugham is a famous and successful novelist and playwright whose work is very popular around the world. Unlike many writers, Maugham's work has achieved great commercial success. Many of his works have been adapted into movies and TV series and have been on the screen. It is still loved by many Hollywood directors^[7]. For example, when the movie of the same name adapted from the novel *The Painted Veil* was released, the movie theater was packed, which the film was well received. However, Maugham has always been a very controversial writer. People's evaluation of him can be described as "ice and fire." Some people rebuked him for being a "second-rate writer" who would only tell stories and mediocre style. The others praised him for being a creative genius writer and great artist. In fact, Maugham has not been accepted by the British literary world. The history of British literature is also extremely cold to Maugham. In a few words, many scholars are considered vulgar or lack aesthetic appreciation for fear of starting to study Maugham. Over time, more reasonable comments were made on Maugham's work. However, there is very little research on the image of China in Maugham's works, and foreign scholars pay more attention to what they are familiar with. Maugham's work has been the focus of foreign literature enthusiasts and workers in China since it was introduced to China in the 1930s. However, decades later, domestic research on Maugham is still limited, and there are many deficiencies and weak links in the research process. Domestic research on Maugham can be divided into two stages: related research before 1949 is mainly the foreword and postscript of the translation and introduction of Maugham's works, an introduction to Maugham in the history of literature, and reviews of his works by newspapers and articles. Due to the special political background of Chinese society at that time, Mao's works were considered to lack revolutionary ideas. Before 1949, Maugham's few works were sporadically translated into China, most of which were his short stories and plays. Some of his plays were put on stage and films. Movies adapted from his novels were screened. At that time, China was often in a random fire, and society was experiencing huge changes. Therefore, revolutionary thought and enthusiasm were needed to stimulate and encourage. In this regard, Russian and Eastern European literature is more likely to be favored by Chinese scholars and the public than English literature. However, Maugham rarely talks about political and social issues in his works, and it is difficult to resonate with the Chinese people's thoughts and emotions. Beginning in the late 1970s, domestic academic circles mainly interpreted Mao's works from the perspective of narratology and feminism. Maugham's novels are a fusion of Eastern and Western ideological styles, as well as diversified perspectives^[8]. This depends not only on his living under the common influence of British and French culture, but also on his personal preferences. Maugham has traveled to South Asia, India and other places. These local customs and ideological consciousness have not been consciously integrated into his creation, forming his unique Chinese and Western style

characteristics. Maugham's special travel experience allowed him to integrate eastern and western cultures into his works, walk freely between the two cultures, and rationally use different cultures to build a bridge of common human spirit^[8]. In general, researchers believe that the theme of Maugham's work is the exploration of fiction and the meaning of human life.

2.3 Orientalism

“Orientalism” as an important part of post-colonial theory, which includes multi-party exchanges, political and cultural influences or re-invasion of the East, originated from a series of British studies of India^[9]. Orientalism no longer refers only to Orientalist scholars and their writings, or to the character, way of life, or qualities associated with Eastern countries, but more generally refers to the methods used to deal with Eastern affairs and the tools of Western imperialism. Since the eleventh century, “Easternism” by Edward Said was published. China is one of the largest countries in the East, although Said rarely mentions China, which it discuss the importance of Orientalism is particularly evident.

Said's ideas of Orientalism are mainly reflected in his “intellectual” theory and Orientalism (see Figure 1). Said's “Theory of Intellectuals” mainly studies the relationship between national culture and world culture, emphasizing “cultural pluralism” and “cultural coexistence”. This western hegemony, which intervenes in political control with cultural texts, precisely reflects Said's Orientalist ideas^[10]. At the same time, he defined “Orientalism” as “a way of coordinating the East according to its position in the European and Western experience.” He believes that “Orientalism” has three levels of meaning: first, “Orientalism” is a discipline as a Western academic research, and it is the “various dogmas and doctrines of the East and Orientals” in the West; second, “Orientalism” is a misinterpreted thinking formula for Eastern understanding and judgment constructed by the West. Third, “Orientalism” is ultimately a discourse of power or cultural hegemony, which is widely distributed in all aspects of Western life. He formed the collective conception, professional authority, discourse system and social mechanism of the East through the integration, type, essence, and symbolization of the East and the Orientals. Maugham is generally considered an anti-colonial author to colonize his compatriots. Compassion and concern. However, Orientalism is masked by superficial descriptions in Maugham's work. In reading between words, Maugham still cannot escape Orientalism. In his book, those parts of the Eastern world are always portrayed as poor, backward and stupid, weak and vulgar. You should know that the descriptions of Orientals are not always negative or inferior. The East often appears mysterious, exotic and artistic. This is the utopia we define and the result of Orientalism.

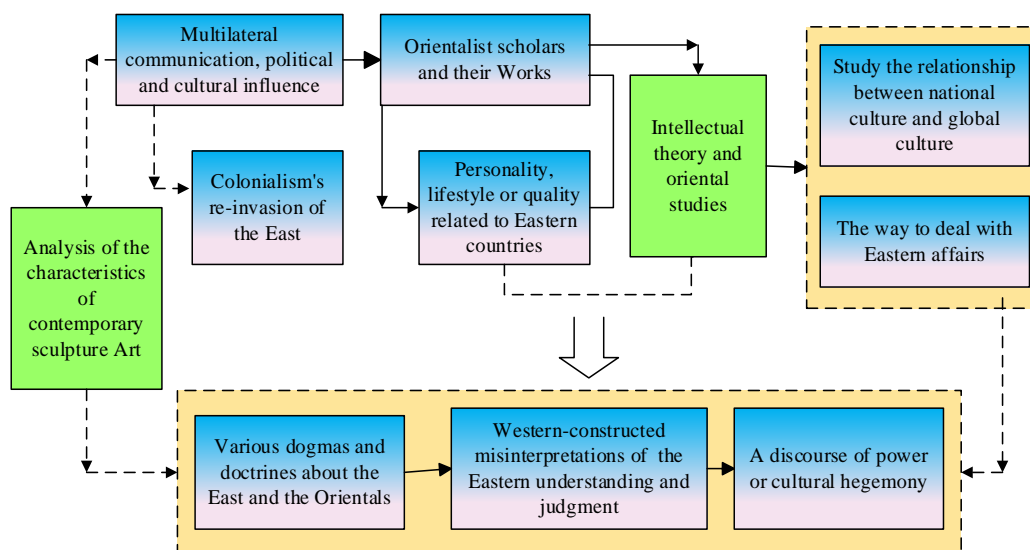


Fig.1 Analysis of Orientalism

3. Privileged Writing of Western Centralism

Western centrism looks at the rest of the world except the West from a specific privileged perspective. This privileged writing puts the East under the watch and control of the West. The world in the eyes of the West, including the East, has become the opposite and reference of the West, creating a dualistic situation of the East and West, “barbarism and civilization.” And presented in the writing of Western narrators. Maugham is more of a sublime observation of China in the context of Western culture. The focus of his observation is always determined by his own cultural needs. Although Maugham has a sincere love for Chinese classical culture, and is full of sympathy and compassion for the hard-working and ordinary people in China, the ruin and backwardness of reality in China, and the poverty and mess in wherever he goes prevents him from escaping from the status quo. As a person from a developed country in the world, influenced by Orientalism, his views on China are inevitably ideological (see Figure 2). The Chinese are always supporting actors in the marginal zone under Maugham's writings. They cannot stand at the center of the stage. In Maugham's works, most of them appear in groups, without their own first name and right to speak, and play a role in connecting the storyline or contrasting the main characters. Under the privileged writing of Western centralism, the status of the East has become a subsidiary of the West.

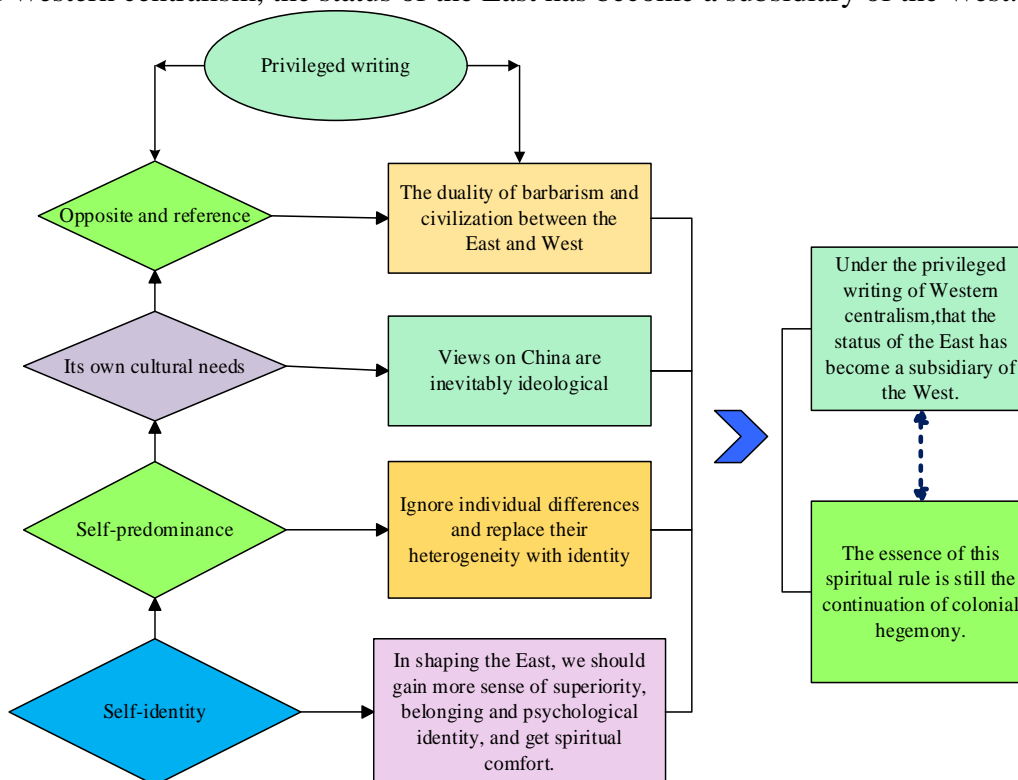


Fig.2 Privileged Writing of Western Centralism

4. The Construction of Chinese Image in Maugham's *The Painted Veil* in the Western Cultural Context

Taking the two Chinese images in Maugham's *The Painted Veil* as research objects, he holds two arguments for the Chinese image academia in Maugham's writings, one is “arrogance and prejudice” and the other is “cultural integration theory” The former emphasized Maugham's colonial discourse and his sense of superiority as a great power, while the latter sought to prove the vivid Chinese image of Maugham in his writings. The two Chinese images are intertwined with each other and form a complete Chinese image. The two are in parallel and indispensable. In the book, Maugham uses a “utopia” construction to show some phenomena that are completely inconsistent with Chinese reality. The use of ideological imagination and utopian imagination presents the product of the collective imagination of society accompanied by the individual imagination of Maugham. The collective imagination as a society presents a pattern of rhetoric, that

is, the East is the opposite of all Western phenomena. As the other, Maugham wrote China with the collective imagination of Western society. “The fiction and imagination in this cross-cultural writing include both the reproduction of Chinese culture by a strong culture and the imagination of China by a Western cultural subject. “With the social collective imagination as the background and entering the horizon of the novel, China by Maugham is the view of the entire British society on China at that time. Such a standard stagnant and backward image has been used as a model of Chinese image in the context of Western culture and society, and of course reflected in Maugham's novels. Against the background of social collective imagination, Maugham put his emotions into the image of the other in the pen and realized the interweaving of two Chinese images. Whether it is a beautiful, bright Utopia or an ugly, dark ideology, the Chinese image as the “other” is a imaginative description of Maugham. The author's creative process has both the subtle influence of society and the exertion of his subjectivity.

The opposition between ideological imagination and utopian imagination is brought about by Western civilization's examination of itself. The self-examination brings about the projection of the image of the other and constructs a view contrary to the reality of the country in the description of the image of the other. The purpose of constructing a utopian image is to show the affirmation of foreign civilizations, and at the same time to express the negation of the realities of its own society. Through his travels, Maugham raised doubts about the collective imagination of society. In this poor, backward land, he saw what was leaving them. The pilgrim's mentality revealed in *The Painted Veil* showed Maugham's attitude towards China Cultural fanaticism and alienation of industrial civilization. At the end of the novel, Kitty found a way to tranquility through that utopian-like pure land, reigniting the hope of life, and this huge spiritual shock was also felt by Maugham when he stepped on the land of China.

5. Conclusions

In summary, Maugham's “*The Painted Veil*” reveals different themes, and warns us that we must have our own personality when we balance people's values. Kitty's transformation has allowed her to undergo a thorough baptism from the soul to the spirit and embarked on a path of rebirth and a path of spiritual growth. Although China is poor and dirty in Mao's writings, the beautiful rural scenery is also infiltrated from time to time. The integration of East and West has also promoted their own development. Walter's plan to develop cholera in China also reflects Caring for each other. He was prejudiced against China in Maugham's style, but he also praised the traditional beauty of China. Whether it was ancient China with countless glories, or real suffering China in the early 20th century, the image of ugly or beautified China is far from the real China. Therefore, it only like the heroine Kitty in the novel when tearing off the “*The Painted Veil*” in front of her eyes. The West should let go of its arrogant superiority and vanity of admiration, that is the correct attitude towards Chinese culture.

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