

Oriental Utopia under the Gaze of the Other—A Brief Analysis of the Construction of the Oriental Image in *Lost Horizon*

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Lost Horizon tells a story about Shangri-La, a paradise in the Orient. Throughout the construction of the Oriental image in the novel, it can be found that under its representation of being enslaved, driven, marginalized and silenced, it implies a three-dimensional flow mechanism with multiple power-relationships interwoven between Orient and Occident, insiders and outsiders, “civilized” and “uncivilized”, male and female, etc. Driven by this mechanism, the Oriental image is integrated under a single abstract label, which has become a way for the Occident to re-understand, reconstruct and express itself after the war.

Keywords: *Lost Horizon*, “the Other”, orientalism, oriental image

Introduction

Lost Horizon is a masterpiece by British writer James Hilton. The novel is set in the 1930s, when the World War I was still in its wake and the World War II was on the horizon and the Occidental world was in turmoil. The main characters Conway, Mallinson and other four occidental travelers in the flight to Peshawar, were hijacked by a mysterious oriental man to the Secret Land of Shangri-La, to carry out a magical journey closely related to the “local people”. But the “locals” Hilton focuses on depicting are not native Chinese and Tibetan residents of Shangri-La, but Occidentals and Europeanized Chinese. The conflict can be seen between the marginalized Oriental residents, the ubiquitous Occidental lifestyle and the silenced Oriental culture. This Arcadia in the Orient seems to have become the utopia of Occidentals, projecting the desire of occidentals to gaze at the different culture from the perspective of “the Other” and try to reconstruct their own culture under the collapse of both the material and spiritual world.

Throughout history, there is a very significant law in the evolution of the Oriental image in Occidental literary works. Starting from the 13th century, the Travels of Marco Polo and the Travels of Mandeville described the Orient as a mysterious land of rich life, advanced science and technology, and magnificent architecture. At that time, travelers showed great interest in Oriental culture. Their works often adopted the technique of “domestication”, which compared the unfamiliar culture of the other with the familiar culture of the self, so that the readers could better understand the alien culture, and at the same time, the otherness in Oriental culture was preserved. They adopt defamiliarization narrative strategy to start from the perspective of the other and take the culture of the other as a mirror to achieve the purpose of self-reflection. For example, in the description of the

balsam orchard in Egypt, Mandeville's *Travels* mentions that there is a kind of paradise apple growing in the garden, "You can cut it into countless small pieces, and no matter it is cut horizontally or vertically, you will find a holy cross shape of our Lord Jesus in the middle" (Mandeville, 2010, p. 15). This is obviously a comparison between the apple of Eden and the alien apple of Egypt in the Old Testament. When writing about the kingdom of the Barbarians in what is now southern China, the author also firmly believes that the monks' act of feeding the beasts was in accordance with God's love. When describing the dwarf country, the author mentions that "dwarfs look down upon people of normal height, just as we look down upon giants or dwarfs" (Mandeville, 2010, p. 77). This is a signal of a change of perspective, from the above merely gazing at Others from the perspective of a third party to knowing others about themselves, fully revealing and reflecting on the defects in their own culture. The works of the Great Geographical Discoveries were full of missionary zeal and detailed descriptions of the rich civilization of the Orient, which further awakened the desire and pursuit of the Occidental travelers to the Orient. During the Enlightenment, along with the awakening and development of Western modernity, the Oriental image was more like a Arcadia in Occidental literary works, and the Oriental utopia was formally used as a weapon against classicism in the Occidental Enlightenment. However, the prosperous Oriental image began to decline sharply from the 19th century, when the mystery of the Orient was forcibly lifted by Occidental colonists, and the Oriental image began to appear in Occidental literature. From the sinister Fu Manchu to the timid Chinese on the Titanic who occupied the seats of women and children on the lifeboats, all of these reflected the evil quality and root of the Oriental civilization. However, since the 20th century, the Occidental world has been shrouded in the shadow of the two World Wars, and the process of world order reconstruction is accompanied by the re-emergence of the Oriental image and the revival of the Oriental Utopian fever.

The drastic change of the Oriental image is closely related to the development of Western modernity. Marshall Berman (1982) in his book *All That Is Solid Melt Into Air*: "To be modern is to find ourselves in a situation which allows us to venture, to be powerful, to delight and to develop, to change ourselves and the world—at the same time threatening to destroy all that we have, all that we know and all that we are" (Berman, 1982, p. 15). From his point of view, modernity can be defined as an appreciation of the dramatic changes in the world, a process of changing oneself while changing the world and its experience (Zhou, 2000, p. 115). Therefore, the development of Western modernity is always accompanied by the construction of the Occidental traveler as the standard, the object of the alien civilization of the process of otherization. On the premise of this process, this paper will analyze the construction of the Oriental image in *Lost Horizon* and the restoration of Occidental civilization from three dimensions: the portrayal of the Oriental image, the struggle of the Other and the labeling of the Orient.

The Portrayal of the Oriental Image: The Europeanized Orient and the Lost Right of Speech

Shangri-la, the "heaven on earth" in *Lost Horizon*, is located in Yunnan Province and Tibet Autonomous Region in China, which should have a unique ethnic style. However, the occidental travelers seemed to avoid talking about these oriental and national connotations, and even did not care about them. Instead, they wore the colored glasses of Eurocentrism and always "gazed" at the land and its people chilly as onlookers. Therefore, the Oriental image in their eyes was not intrinsically different from that of the Occidental, and their appreciation of Oriental culture is always based on the existing Occidental civilization.

Although Shangri-La in the novel had the most advanced plumbing system and a complete set of heating equipment, all of these were the result of the technological revolution in the Occident. Even the celadon bath tub, which combines Chinese and Occidental elements that had impressed Occidental travelers, was essentially an American import. It can be said that what particularly shocked the protagonist Conway and his entourage was not the extensive and profound Oriental culture itself, but the combination of enlightened, superior Occident and unenlightened, inferior Orient. The local people directly connected with the protagonist were also not native Han Chinese and Tibetan residents, but the later-comers and self-appointed creators of the Secret Land, which were Europeanized Chinese and Occidentals.

Europeanized Chinese possessed high level of knowledge and artistic skills, which seemed to create an insurmountable chasm between them and other local residents and also made them more familiar, approachable and accessible in the eyes of Occidental travelers. But the process from initial glance to their gradual acquaintance with protagonists was full of pre-rehearsed traces and deliberately embellished plot. Chang, who always wore a Chinese gown and enjoyed drinking tea, seemed to be a conduit between Conway and the High Lama with his fluent Cockney accent, but Conway never asked for his full name, and no one knew about Chang's inner world and spiritual pursuits. It can be said that the Oriental figure of Chang is nothing but an abstract and symbolic tool, whose purpose is to show his skills to ingratiate himself with Occidental travelers and to mechanically spread the will of the High Lama. Lo-Tsen, a young girl dressed in Manchu costumes, was familiar with occidental musical instruments and had the magical effect of healing minds and smoothing out troubles. Therefore, Occidental travelers in the Secret Land were very fond of spending time with her. Although her interaction with outsiders was limited to music, the main characters Conway and Mallinson developed a crush on her. The calm and self-possessed Conway chose to ask Chang about Lo-Tsen's past and sympathized with her suffering, while the passionate and impulsive Mallinson turned his love for Lo-Tsen into a willful and self-righteous desire to protect and save her, leading her to leave the Secret Land strongly. No one knew whether Lo-Tsen was willing to be tapped her past experiences or whether she needed to be protected and saved. She never talked about herself or expressed her feelings. On the contrary, the "Occidental hero" spoke for her all the time, which reflects that her existence is nothing more than a "metaphor" for the relationship between the Orient and Occident—the Occident always has the right to speak, while the Orient is nothing more than a "silent Other" who cannot express themselves on the stage prescribed and dominated by the Occident, and has never been able to form a real dialogue with Occident.

Occidental colonists even fancied themselves as the creators of Secret Land as well as occupied and colonized the core of Oriental culture in the name of missionary work. The first generation of Shangri-La was founded by Perrault from Luxembourg, who had studied at Paris, Bologna, and other universities, was fond of music and the arts, and was a member of the Nestorian Christianity Mission to the Far Orient. After his unexpected arrival in Shangri-La, he accepted all aspects of local life with an open mind, but despised the thousand-year-old marriage customs. He had no reason to inveigh against the prevalent fondness for the tangatse berry because he himself was indulged in the fruit to some extent. It means that he only accepted the local culture that he admired, and for customs that he could not accept, he built lamaseries and imposed Occidental Christian values on the local people. Thus, the enlightened converts could enjoy a peaceful and comfortable life like him, while the unenlightened natives could only subsist by working as porters and farmers, peddling their labour for a

living. Even so, the Europeanized Chinese could not take on the responsibility of governing Shangri-La because “the best candidates are some European Latins and Germans, or maybe Americans” (Hilton, 2009, p. 108). Even the typical converts, such as Chang and Lo-Tsen, had to earn a living by acquiring the skills upper clergy preferred to flatter them. This unjustified preference suggests that although the Europeanized Chinese are granted the right to speak, their inner voices remain unheard by the readers and are essentially silenced, enslaved, oppressed, and marginalized like the “uncivilized” natives.

Through the recognition and transformation of Shangri-La, the European people had a sense of ownership which could resolve the sense of loss their material home, so as to further define their own characteristics in this exotic land and imaginary Other. So they could finally realize the reconstruction of the world and self in the chaotic international order at that time.

The Dispute of the Other: The “Fluid” Identity of the Other from the Perspective of Colonialism

In *Lost Horizon*, Hilton does not simply construct the relationship between the Orient and the Occident as an entirely different “Other”. Within this framework, there is a process of othering between local and foreign, “civilized” and “uncivilized”, male and female and other multiple power relations. These relations are intertwined and migrate in multiple directions, which together portray the image of the Other with fluidity from the perspective of colonialism.

As outsiders who had strayed into Shangri-La, all residents of the fairyland were the Other to Conway and his entourage in the novel. Therefore, when first arriving in Shangri-La, the protagonist Conway would see himself as an indifferent bystander, watching out for everyone in Shangri-La, so as not to accidentally fall back into the danger of isolation. Due to the unfamiliarity with natives and their powerlessness to predict further developments, they naturally formed an “alliance” out of safety concerns, and their only request was to leave as soon as possible. But as the plot developed, especially after Conway was handpicked by the High Lama as the third generation successor of Shangri-La and had a deeper understanding of the lifestyle, hierarchical order and operation mode of fairyland, his sense of belonging to this land reached an unprecedented level. At this point, the Other in Conway’s eyes were no longer all residents, at least he was open to some of the Shangri-La people, which was why he hesitated to leave Shangri-La.

In the eyes of the High Lama, the Other are all the non-occidental people living in Shangri-La. He believes that the only commendable virtue of the native Tibetans is their innate high adaptability, in other words, an ability that anyone born in Shangri-La does not need to learn. The Han Chinese are a little better than Tibetans, but “even among them we have a high percentage of failures” (Hilton, 2009, p. 108). The last visitor to fairyland, a Japanese, is not a valuable acquisition, and “best subjects, undoubtedly, are the Nordic and Latin races of Europe; perhaps the Americans would be equally adaptable” (Hilton, 2009, p. 108). As could be seen from the plots, although the High Lama had been in Shangri-La for many years, he still regarded himself as a European. Only Occidental living in Shangri-La could bring him spiritual resonance and be worthy of his time and effort to communicate with them, non-Occidental, no matter how distinguished their individual qualities, could not be considered as his proper successors. This unconditional preference is actually a metaphor for colonialism, that is, in the eyes of European colonists, only the countries that are also European colonial powers are the subjects, and no matter

whether they end up in the same destination or not, other colonial powers are excluded and never really enter the center of the European colonizers' discourse to gain a full voice, being muted, weakened and excluded just like the colonized.

In *Lost Horizon*, the power relationship between "civilized" and "uncivilized" is reflected as follows: in the Europeanized Chinese people's perception, the Other are the local Han Chinese and Tibetan residents. Take Chang as an example. Although he grew up in the Orient and wore Oriental clothes, he did not consider himself an Oriental, so he learned Occidental culture to please and serve the High Lama, while Han Chinese and Tibetan inhabitants became the object of his servitude and his means of transportation across the vast expanse of snow and glacier to greet Occidental travelers with enthusiasm.

For the Occidental male Hugh Conway and Charles Mallinson, the Oriental female Lo-Tsen is the imaginary Other. In their eyes, Lo-Tsen has "long, slender nose, high cheekbones, eggshell pallor, her black hair was drawn tightly back and braided" (Hilton, 2009, p. 72), which is the stereotyped writing of the image of Oriental women, that is, every Oriental woman is more or less satisfied with these characteristics, and therefore cannot express any Oriental woman. In addition, the portrait that her "mouth was like a little pink convolvulus" (Hilton, 2009, p. 72) is full of carnal love for Oriental women, that is, compared with Occidental women's naturally wider lips, the small and delicate lips of Oriental women can generate more sexual attraction for Occidental men. In the novel, Mallinson's desire to possess, protect and save Lo-Tsen, as well as Conway's behavior of probing into her past and comparing her with Occidental women, all indicate that by gazing at "the Other", creating fantasies of Oriental women, deliberately weakening the image of Oriental women, depersonalizing Oriental femininity, and labeling Oriental women's groups, Occidental men are able to regain the male dominance they gradually lost due to the war.

In conclusion, a network of the Other based on Orient and Occident is on the horizon, interweaving local and foreign, "civilized" and "uncivilized", male and female, and other multiple power relations. It reflects that in the colonial system, Orient and Occident is not a simple binary opposition, under its dichotomous representation, it is likely to hide a multi-dimensional flow mechanism, which is powered by the development of modernity and at the same time facilitates the further development of modernity to a higher level. In other words, the multi-dimensional flow mechanism already existed at the birth of the Orient-Occident concept, relying on the conflict and confrontation of different civilizations, regions, classes and genders and the multi-directional process of othering, gradually cutting off from the past and forming a new perception of the Other.

Labeling Orient: The Need and Redevelopment of Orientalism

The Orient in *Lost Horizon* should be a secret world with multi-ethnic culture and plateau scenery, but the author's description of its scenery and people always follows the rigid formula of general description and stacking of Oriental elements. For example, Chang, as a typical Oriental figure, presents a combination of pale descriptions such as "grey-haired, cleanshaven" (Hilton, 2009, p. 41) and the Oriental element of "silk embroidered gown" (Hilton, 2009, p. 41). And the description of Mount Karakal as "the glittering cone" (Hilton, 2009, p. 40) makes it hard for readers to locate in the East from the above mentioned geographical location. Obviously, this formula fails to express any Oriental image, since it always places the Orient under one or two single abstract labels, such as silk, tea ceremony and lotus pond, which are the most typical Oriental stereotypes

in this book. Thus Shangri-La can appear in every part of the Orient and not be out of place, because all of them more or less conform to these common characteristics, so the Oriental labels cannot reflect the real oriental condition, but the Orient constructed by the Occident, that is, the Occident itself. The reason for this phenomenon can be traced back to Edward Wadie Said's understanding of the Orient in his book *Orientalism*. First of all, he believed that "the concepts of 'Orient' and 'Occident' are not stable in the ontological sense. These concepts are constructed out of necessity rather than historical reality" (Wang, 2018, p. 006). In other words, the Orient is not a pure geographical concept, but a "general concept" created by the Occident after the awakening of western modernity, that is, other parts of the world except the Occident. Their existence, from the political, economic, military, religious, cultural and other aspects, in an objective sense, has posed a threat to the development of the Occident, so Occident need to establish a unified oriental image, in order to clarify the difference between itself and others, so as to realize self-identity identification. Therefore, in Occidental literary works, the Orient can be Egypt, India, the Middle East, or China. Although there are slight differences between them, they are all unified under the Oriental concept, with "ignorance", "uncivilized", "backward" and other common denominator, so as to need the salvation of Occidental colonists. It can be seen that the purpose of the labeling Orient is to meet the needs of Orientalism expression.

However, due to the existence of a multidimensional flow mechanism within the Orient-Occident relationship, the Orientalism expressions are no longer limited to the Occident itself, but gradually expanded from the Occident to the Orient itself, that is, self-orientalism. The typical examples in this book are the Europeanized Chinese, such as Chang and Lo-Tsen, who learn the Occidental culture and abandon the Oriental identity. They even accepted the fate of being enslaved and driven by Occidentals, and completely became a vassal of the occidental civilization. In recent years, Orientalism have shifted from "one Orient" to "another Orient", that is, after possessing power, the Orient begin to construct other places in a way similar to orientalism, which is a kind of influence and penetration in the way of thinking. In the novel, the Occidental travelers consider all the residents of Shangri-La as the Other, the High Lama considers the non-Western people of Shangri-La as the Other, and the European Chinese consider the uncivilized residents of Han and Tibetan as the Other. Obviously, such a clear chain of disdain will not stop abruptly. It can be imagined that after the further expansion of Shangri-La, Although they are also enslaved, driven and marginalized, the original Han and Tibetan residents of Shangri-La are bound to reject other later-comers, label them as "ignorant" and "uncivilized", and deprive them of their right to speak, which is just like the process of constructing the Other after Orient gained power.

So far, for the purpose of constructing itself, controlling and transforming the Orient, the Occident creates the general concept of the Orient, integrating other regions except the Occident under the unified labels, so as to realize the Orientalism expression. However, there exists a multidimensional flow mechanism in the logic of the Orient and the Occident, which directly leads to the flow of Orientalism expression from the Occident to the Orient. After the Orient possess power, it begin to construct other places with similar means as the Occident.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the Oriental image in *Lost Horizon* serves as a tool to satisfy the colonial fantasies of the Occidentals. By injecting occidental elements into the oriental land, they have the sense of ownership of the Orient, the pleasure of transforming the Orient and the sense of superiority as occidental colonists. On the other

hand, the construction of the Oriental image in the oriental world controlled by Occidentals means that the Orient has become the general imagination of occidental society, which means that the author expects to reconstruct a pre-war glorious Occident on the Oriental land to make up for and resolve the pain of the loss of the homeland. Although the pursuit of the occidental ideal world has never stopped since the publication of the novel, it is not clear whether the echoes will be heard, which proves the novel's intriguing open-ended ending—"Do you think he will ever find Shangri-La?" (Hilton, 2009, p. 167).

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