Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present

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If we are unclear today about our feelings for China, we should not worry over much. Westerners have been unclear about China since they first began to live there in any numbers and to write about the country at length. The history of our confusion goes back more than four hundred years: in 1584 the first detailed accounts of China began to appear in the letters home of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, and Gonzalez de Mendoza's pioneering history appeared a year later. Although Ricci and his other contemporaries were drawing on the preconceptions of earlier generations of travelers to China, the honor of inaugurating a new genre of commentary based on unparalleled firsthand experience nonetheless goes to them.

To the sixteenth-century Westerners China was large, tough, and well-ordered. They never ceased to wonder at the size of the country and the diversity of its products. Few Westerners echoed the hopeful boasts of some early Spaniards—descendants in spirit of the conquistadors—that they could conquer the realm with a few hundred elite troops. The acuter visitors saw that China's cities were walled and those walls were well-patrolled, its armies were huge, and its war junks were numerous and well-armed. They also saw the magistrates' tough approach toward civil disorder, their rigorous control over the civilian population, the terrible savagery of the beatings they were free to inflict on their Chinese subjects, and their control over economic life.

Despite a general view that the first Jesuits were biased in China's favor, I have found no early works in which the dark and light sides did not blend under this early Western gaze. Thus, China's ethical system and the ideal of a mandarinate trained through the Confucian classics, selected by examinations, and posted by an absolute emperor to rule benignly over the peaceful countryside were lyrically described; but the ex-

cesses of Buddhist ritual fasting, the magical extravagances of the Taoists, the ever-present evidence of infanticide, the sale of children, and the prevalence of prostitution and male homosexuality were also described. Chinese sophistication in theological debate was noted by many but so was its counterpart of intransigence to the Christian message. To the praise of printing and literati culture in China, which seemed to offer great opportunities for the spread of the Christian missionary message, had to be added the melancholy fact that anti-Christian tracts spread swiftly through the cities and countryside.[1]

The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the realities of the Manchu conquest thereafter did not lead to greatly changed perceptions. It became easier, of course, to identify with a man like the K'ang-hsi emperor, who ruled from 1661 to 1722, than it had been with the reclusive Wan-li emperor of the Ming, who never saw or spoke to any missionaries or traders during his long reign from 1572 to 1620. K'ang-hsi showed consistent curiosity about the West and even affection for several missionaries until he became worried that they were involved with his son's cabals and also grew aware of the papal pretensions to infallibility in matters of faith and spiritual interpretation. In the writings of the later seventeenth century Jesuits like Bouvet presented K'ang-hsi as a benevolent type of "Sun King" on the model of Louis XIV—not without deliberation, as French funding for the China mission had become a staple for its survival. As Bouvet put it in a letter to King Louis XIV, printed as the preface to his *Histoire de l'empereur de la Chine:*

> The Jesuits, whom Your Majesty sent [to China] some years ago, were astonished to discover at the ends of the earth something that hitherto they had seen only in France: namely, a Prince who, like you, sire, combines a genius that is both sublime and practical with a heart worthy of his empire, who is master of himself and of his subjects and [who is] equally adored by his people and respected by his neighbors. . . . A Prince, in short, uniting in his person most of the great qualities that heroes have, who could be the most accomplished monarch to reign on this earth for a long time were it not that his reign coincided with that of Your Majesty.[2]

But despite such hyperbole, Bouvet's writings, like those of Le Comte who preceded him and Du Halde who followed after, were jammed with

1. For these early works on China see Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, 5 vols. to date (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965–); Pasquale d'Elia, ed., *Fonti Ricciane*, 3 vols. (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1942–1949); and Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1984). For Chinese criticisms of the Westerners see John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983), and Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

2. J. Bouvet, *Histoire de l'empereur de la Chine* (Paris: 1699; reprint, Tientsin: M. Uytwerf, LaHaye, 1940), 6–7 (my translation).

practical information about Chinese politics and culture. Yet biases also began to appear, especially in the direction of minimizing China's faults so that the tasks of conversion would not appear to be insurmountable. These French writers also dwelt on the ideas that Confucianism somehow presaged the possibilities of a general universal morality and that Chinese written ideographs held within them the hope for a universal language that transcended dialects and geography. Both these facets were to be picked up by the alert philosopher Leibniz, along with the binary mathematical structure that lay behind the arrangements of the sixty-four hexagrams in the *Book of Change* and the hope that China would become a part of a newly internationalized global scientific academy. For a time Leibniz was also intrigued by the figurist position, as it was called, as were other scholars well into the eighteenth century; the figurists, far from being alarmed by the great age and comprehensiveness of the Confucian classics, sought to use the contents of those classics to prove the accuracy of the Biblical chronology, which was beginning to come under serious question. Their work should be seen in the context of what historians of anthropology describe as the last defense of "monogenic" theories of humankind, which trace all humans back to Noah and eventually to Adam. This monogenic view was opposed to the mounting interest in "polygenic" theories, which, by allowing for the multifaceted origins of the human race, made possible the downgrading of segments of the human family and the placing of some humans in a zone of prerationality. Polygenic theories cleared the way for the rise of an allegedly "scientific" justification for racism. By the mid 1730s scholars had begun to do something that would have been literally unthinkable to Ricci: by analyzing the "conic" nature of Chinese heads, they were able to place the Chinese people alongside the Patagonians, the Hottentots, and the American Indians in the category of "homo monstrosus," something fundamentally different from the "homo sapiens" designation that those same scholars claimed for themselves.[3]

The complexity of the story of Western perceptions of China springs in part from the fact that at the very time the Jesuits were falling under political suspicion in Europe, coming under attack from both the lay intelligentsia and the Jansenists and also losing any influence they had once had in China—in other words, during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, at the end of the reign of the Yung-cheng emperor and the beginning of the reign of the Ch'ien-lung emperor—the books

3. Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), esp. 413–25; Basil Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (Geneva: Institute et Musee Voltaire, 1963); and David Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1977).

in which they had analyzed China were reaching the peak of their influence. In part this influence was because China was becoming isolationist, restricting trade and travel to a minimum for all foreigners; the Jesuit histories kept their spell because they were firsthand accounts. But in part this influence was also because several French thinkers of the Enlightenment, beginning with Pierre Bayle and continuing through Voltaire, had seized on the data buried in the Jesuit books—especially the reality of an ethically moral Chinese society that was also patently non-Christian—to criticize the role that the Catholic church was playing in the European society of the time. Voltaire praised the Chinese in his writings for their "natural deism." Two examples, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* and *Orphelin de la Chine*, the first a book of world history and the second a stage play, both completed by 1750, illustrate Voltaire's approach to China: in the first he started the history of civilization with the Chinese state and in the other explained how the stony heart of Genghis Khan was softened by the moral purity of the gentle Chinese.

We must use a real effort of the imagination to understand how great the shock must have been to Voltaire's readers when they saw world history start not with Biblical chronology but with Chinese time. Bouvet's equation was reversed with the defiant opening words of the *Essai*, "The empire of China at that time was vaster than that of Charlemagne." Voltaire went on to praise China's laws: "In other countries the laws are used to punish crimes; in China they do more—they reward virtue." As to Confucius, "his morality is as pure, as stern and at the same time as humane as that of Epictetus," and far from being atheists, the Chinese had their own measured view of the realm of heaven: "The great misunderstanding over Chinese rites sprang from our judging their practices in light of ours: we carry the prejudices that spring from our contentious nature to the ends of the world."[4]

This emphasis on the practical and moral force of the Chinese, their potential for raising the quotient of goodness in the world, was still a matter for serious debate in the late eighteenth century. It was central to the writings of the French physiocrats at the peak of their influence. Lord Macartney took it seriously in his *Journal* as he traveled to China for King George III and the East India Company during 1793 and 1794. Benjamin Franklin bought books on China and debated Chinese social organization; he even contemplated sending commissioners to China so that the "young people" of America could study China's aged laws. Thomas Jefferson reflected on the "natural aristocracy" of the Chinese. As if to encapsulate this tradition of admiration, the wealthy Philadelphia merchant Stephen Girard, putting together a fleet to trade with China in

4. Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* (Paris, 1771), 1:13, 31, 33, and 36.

1795, proudly named the four ships *Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu,* and *Helvetius*.[5]

In fact, had Girard read carefully in Montesquieu and Rousseau, he would have found that they expressed profound reservations about China and about Chinese culture and government. Both writers seem to have picked up strands of disillusion with the Chinese that had been growing alongside the admiration from the beginning of the eighteenth century. For example, hostility to the Chinese is sharp in some of the novels of Defoe and in the memoirs of the formidable English naval commodore George Anson, who visited Canton in the 1740s and found it an awful place, inhabited by a dishonest and craven populace that was controlled by contemptible officials. In the best-selling account of his voyage, published when he returned to a hero's welcome in England after capturing a Spanish galleon, Anson let all his prejudices show: "This much may undoubtedly be asserted," he wrote, "that in artifice, falsehood, and an attachment to all kinds of lucre, many of the Chinese are difficult to be paralleled by any other people; but then the combination of these talents, and the manner in which they are applied in particular emergencies, are often beyond the reach of a foreigner's penetration." The goal of such passages—and there were many others—was to cure other European writers of their "very ridiculous prepossessions." Anson particularly labored to correct the mistaken Western view of Chinese morality.

> But we are told by some of the Missionaries, that though the skill of the Chinese in science is indeed much inferior to that of the Europeans, yet the morality and justice taught and practised by them are most exemplary. And from the description given by some of these good fathers, one should be induced to believe, that the whole Empire was a well-governed affectionate family, where the only contests were, who should exert the most humanity and beneficence. But our preceding relation of the behavior of the Magistrates, Merchants and Tradesmen at Canton sufficiently refutes these jesuitical fictions. And as to their theories of morality, if we may judge from the specimens exhibited in the works of the Missionaries, we shall find them solely material points, instead of discussing the proper criterion of human actions, and regulating the general conduct of mankind to one another, on reasonable and equitable principles.
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> Indeed, the only pretension of the Chinese to a more refined morality than their neighbors is founded, not on their integrity or beneficence, but

5. In addition to Guy, *French Image of China*, see J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire Historia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); Lord George Macartney's journal as edited by J. L. Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China: being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793–1794* (London: Longmans, 1962); and Jonathan Goldstein, *Philadelphia and the China Trade* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978), 35.

solely on the affected evenness of their demeanor, and their constant attention to suppress all symptoms of passion and violence.[6]

These remarks might be dismissed as the mere rumblings of a naval curmudgeon had they not caught a deeper response in France, where the earlier optimism about China was fading. The most solid critique advanced by Montesquieu, which sprang in part from his ongoing interest in geography, climate, and environmentalism, was that there was something awry in China's so-called laws because they inhibited liberty rather than contributing to it and because the Chinese were ruled by fear rather than wisdom. Rousseau, who had quarreled with Voltaire on other matters, also disagreed with Voltaire over China. Rousseau felt that an analysis of Chinese culture proved the correctness of his insight that education could corrupt rather than ennoble manners, that there was a primitive nobility of character that had to be tended if it was to blossom, and that this capacity had atrophied in China. Nicolas Boulanger echoed the same points in his *Oriental Despotism* of 1763. From these perceptions it was not a long way to Condorcet's realization that the Chinese were outside the march of human progress or to Hegel's contentions in the early nineteenth century that China was outside the development of world history, could not partake of the manifestations of the growth of the spirit on earth, and remained forever frozen at an earlier stage of development prior to the growth of the subjectivity and freedom in which Western cultures now rejoiced. Hegel's words are worth pondering, for they demonstrate how rigorously China had now been systematized, how "scientific" the analysis of her backwardness had been made to appear.

> In China the Universal Will immediately commands what the Individual is to do, and the latter complies and obeys with proportionate renunciation of reflection and personal independence. If he does not obey, if he thus virtually separates himself from the Substance of his being, inasmuch as this separation is not mediated by a retreat within a personality of his own, the punishment he undergoes does not affect his subjective and internal, but simply his outward existence. The element of subjectivity is therefore as much wanting to this political totality as the latter is on its side altogether destitute of a foundation in the moral disposition of the subject. For the Substance is simply an individual—the Emperor—whose law constitutes all the disposition. Nevertheless, this ignoring of inclination does not imply caprice, which would itself indicate inclination—that is, subjectivity and mobility. Here we have the One Being of the State supremely dominant—

6. Daniel Defoe's critique appears in *The Further Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (London: W. Taylor, 1719). The quotations are from Richard Walter and Benjamin Robins, comps., *A Voyage around the World in the Years 1704–44 by George Anson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 351–52, 366, 368.

> the Substance which, still hard and inflexible, resembles nothing but itself—includes no other element.[7]

There is a good deal of scholarly debate as to exactly what was contributed to Western perceptions of China by the merchants—both European and American—who began to spend long periods of their lives in China as the tributary system sputtered to its end in the late 1820s and 1830s. The record seems mixed: some were entranced, amused, or spoke of the value of their Chinese friendships, but others (like Anson before them) found venality, cruelty, and deceit. But after 1842, when the Chinese armies had been defeated by the British in the Opium War and the country opened to travel, trade, a Western military presence, and evangelization by both Protestant and Catholic missionaries in large numbers, the very obvious weakness of China bred contempt rather than admiration. If there was sympathy, it was for the individual Chinese poor rather than for the country as a whole, its government, its ethical system, or its art.

Whatever sincere admiration both Americans and Europeans had for Chinese decoration in the eighteenth century, the period of "chinoiserie" when they eagerly bought Chinese furnishings, porcelain, wallpaper, and silks, faded in the ebullient hard-driving world of the early industrial revolution and the railway age. The world of rococo faded in the glare of Victorian self-esteem. One can pick up many traces of waning Western interest, from the gently dismissive comments of Goethe to his faithful companion Eckermann that the symbol for Chinese culture is the lightness of wicker furniture or the comments of Charles Dickens's Mr. Pickwick on the impossibilities of a meaningful Chinese morality down to Ralph Waldo Emerson's analysis of fatalism and withdrawal and his contrast of these with the freedom and dynamism he now ascribed to the West. China would have to be "regenerated" by the West, Emerson wrote, if it is to enter the modern world; it had been the "playground of the world's childhood" but now would have to be forced to grow up. Karl Marx concurred in his early writings that touched on China's problems. It would be a long time before China saw the words "liberté, égalité, fraternité" inscribed on the Great Wall, he wrote; indeed, Western imperialism and colonization would have a positive role in the Chinese case as they battered down the barriers of isolation that made China a holdout against the spread of capitalism across the world. For it was only when that spread had been completed that the emergence of a new socialist consciousness would become a meaningful possibility.[8]

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956) 120–21 and Guy, *French Image of China*.

8. For background references see Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of China, 1785–1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969),

In the later nineteenth century, except for missionaries still able to be moved by Chinese poverty or the ravages of opium addiction, China was a political problem that was far away and out of mind to most Europeans. After 1849, however, Americans no longer had the luxury of not thinking about China: they had to face the new and startling problems of rising Chinese immigration into the western United States. As the number of Chinese immigrants rose into the tens of thousands and made its presence felt in the building of the western railroads, in the mines, and in the market gardening and fishing industries, the newly perceived threat of a cheap labor force undercutting the gains of the European immigrants became a potent political issue. A racist rhetoric of loathing and fear, with talk of "mongolization," tainted blood, and disease, became a part of political electioneering. Discriminatory legislation in housing, workplace, and school became commonplace. Chinese were killed by mobs in California and Wyoming. Their strangeness to European immigrants and their perceived desire to return to their ancestral land rather than to settle and build a better United States were invoked against them, along with the appalling conditions of their "China towns," which local legislation had so cruelly helped to create and perpetuate. The melancholy story of restrictive immigration laws against the Chinese—restrictions levied then at no other foreign nationals—is one facet of late-nineteenth-century history that must simply be confronted; China was circumscribed by the immigration treaties of 1882 and 1892 and then, after the trauma and the very real horror of the Boxer risings in 1900, by the final passage of the Exclusion Act of 1904.[9]

We should not be surprised to find that fictional works echoed or even helped to trigger events in the real world. By the 1890s a new genre of anti-Chinese writings had spread into the popular marketplace in the United States. Novels now played on fears of a Chinese amphibious attack on the coasts of California or, more fearsomely, postulated an alliance of the Chinese in the United States with American Indians and Blacks for the purpose of destroying the white population of the continent. Chinatowns became perfect settings for stories of lust, deception, and intrigue. I was amused to discover that in one of these novels, published in 1900, the fiendish crime king of a "tong" syndicate is a Chinese Yale graduate whose racial "shortcomings" obviously transcend the powers of his East Coast Ivy League education to change his nature; but all is not lost for white America because the villain is destroyed by a Yale classmate just before he can bring his awful plans to fruition. It was a short jump from this kind of thing to the fuller plans of Fu Manchu for world domination and to his constant frustration at the hands of his white nemesis.[10]

and Mary G. Mason, *Western Concepts of China and the Chinese, 1840–1876* (New York: Seeman, 1939). For other specific examples see Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1837), 414; Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann* (New York: Dutton, 1930), 164; F. I. Carpenter, ed., *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 37, 239; and Dona Torr, ed., *Marx on China, 1853–1860* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1951).

9. For an introduction to the huge literature on this subject see Michael Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

In the post-Boxer Chinese world of the Open Door, the collapsing Ch'ing dynasty, the fledgling republic, the warlord period, and the Kuomintang-Communist civil war, Westerners would probably not seek to glean much wisdom from China. Of course, with events such as the First World War, the Bolshevik revolution, the Great Depression, and the rise of Nazism, Westerners could hardly congratulate themselves that all was well in their own cultures. And yet, interestingly, the early twentieth century saw the development of a major interest in Chinese studies on the part of Westerners. The pioneering nineteenth-century efforts of James Legge, Thomas Wade, W. A. P. Martin, and S. Wells Williams were followed by the remarkable achievements of Edouard Chavannes and Otto Franke in classical historiography, Arthur Waley in poetry, Osvald Siren in the history of art, H. B. Morse in diplomatic history, and Kenneth Scott Latourette in mission history. Most of us writing in this volume have intellectual debts to this particular congerie of scholars, and it is hard not to see the dedication of so much of their intellectual energy to China early in this century as being a mark of respect for China's past intellectual richness. (There were of course some mischievous and cautionary frauds like Edmund Backhouse, but surely he remains an anomaly.)[11]

My sample list of major scholars, given in the preceding paragraph, contains a Swede, a Frenchman, a German, an Englishman, and an American, indicating that by the twentieth century the history of Western perceptions of China must be approached in an international context. Perhaps this internationalization was because of the telegraph and the growth of daily newspapers that used foreign correspondents, perhaps it was because of changes in the world publishing industry, or perhaps it was because of the prevalence of self-selected (or politically induced) exile in each other's Western countries. But the twentieth cen-

10. See William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850–1940* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982).

11. A good background to the growth of this Sinological tradition is Arthur F. Wright's "The Study of Chinese Civilization," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21 (1960). On Backhouse, see Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

tury has seen such a proliferation of the modes in which perceptions of China are expressed that I have to abandon chronology and assess these modes in broad categories if I am to make any sense of what has been happening.

Such a detailed overview can be built on the accurate, but perhaps limiting, focus of Harold Isaacs's influential *Scratches on Our Minds.*[12] Isaacs broke the American perception of China down into the following periods: "benevolence" from 1905 to 1937, "admiration" from 1937 to 1944, "disenchantment" from 1944 to 1949, and "hostility" through the 1950s. This schema makes good sense in describing American reactions to the Kuomintang years, the war of resistance to Japan, the civil war, and the Communist victory. During this period, for the first time, American attitudes were being molded by comprehensive and deliberate political forces—from Henry Luce's *Time-Life* efforts to influence American views of China to the McCarthyites and the Committee of One Million and their attempts to scare Americans out of sympathy for the mainland. I might add that if I were to update Isaacs's schema, I would postulate a period of "reawakened curiosity" from 1970 to 1974, of "guileless fascination" from 1974 to 1979, and of "renewed skepticism" from 1979 through the 1980s. The future will doubtless hold other shifts.

Rather than repeating or expanding on Isaacs's formulations for the twentieth century, which would require a survey of all modern histories and political reportage on China, I instead focus briefly on how the most influential purveyors of perceptions in fictional form (which must include films and television in addition to books) have chosen to present the relationships of their protagonists to the Chinese themselves.

The most obvious mode of representation is to focus on the Chinese in China. This approach is, of course, the stuff of most political and historical analysis, and it has produced interesting fictional results. The most influential example has been Pearl Buck's view of the suffering of China's peasants in their own parched and battered landscape (most famously in *The Good Earth*).[13] Her oddly archaic language sought to root China's contemporary experiences in a timeless zone that has been at the center of so many Western views of China—including Montesquieu's and Hegel's. But other writers drew other lessons from their Chinese actors in Chinese settings. In Judge Dee, Robert van Gulik created a symbol of shrewdness and integrity; the judge more than compensated for the harshness of his times. In the Kai Lung stories Ernest Bramah created a hilarious parody of "Confucian" rectitude by trading on every nuance of over-blown Chinese vocabulary.[14] In recent years new genres of anti–Cultural Revolution fiction have emerged, ranging from the subtleties of Chen Jo-hsi's stories in *The Execution of Mayor Yin* to the derring-do of *The Coldest Winter of Peking.*[15]

This approach to China should be separated from the very different one that places Western protagonists on Chinese soil with the goal of reaching the Western reader with greater immediacy. (Of course there is a paradox at work here because the "immediacy" for the Western reader is inevitably once removed from the "reality" of the Chinese psyche.) Such books share at one level the opportunities for reportage caught by many talented Western visitors, including Edgar Snow in *Red Star over China,* Graham Peck in *Two Kinds of Time,* and more recently Simon Leys in *Chinese Shadows* and Vera Schwarcz in *Long Road Home.*[16] The novel and the film, in contrast with reportage, can highlight their central figures and bring the drama into sharper focus: one thinks especially of John Hersey's eager young American engineer sizing up the opportunities for transforming the Yangtze for hydroelectric purposes in *A Single Pebble,*[17] the kidnapped heroine trying to make up her mind about China's war in the film *The Bitter Tea of General Yen,* or the success that James Clavell and Robert S. Elegant had in linking the worlds of Hong Kong and China in either *Taipan* or *Dynasty.*[18] The most magical work in this mode is the novel by the art historian Victor Segalen titled *René Leys.* Segalen's creation of a brilliant European linguist and decadent illuminates the fading grandeur and internal corruption of the Manchu Court.[19] Most books focusing on the Westerner in China end up making him or her appear isolated and frustrated and increase our sense of

12. Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: Western Images of China and India* (New York: John Day, 1958), reprinted as *Images of Asia* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), and as *Scratches on Our Minds* (White Plains, NY: Sharpe, 1980); the 1980 edition published by Isaacs contains a new preface. Isaacs's periodization is outlined on p. 71 (same pagination in all editions).

13. Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: John Day, 1931). An excellent evaluation of Pearl Buck is given by Michael Hunt, "Pearl Buck: Popular Expert on China," *Modern China* 3 (1977): 33–63.

14. See, for example, Ernest Bramah, *The Celestial Omnibus: Collected Tales of Kai Lung* (1940; reprint, Chester Springs, Pa.: Dufour, 1987) and *Kai Lung beneath the Mulberry Tree* (1940; reprint, Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1978). See also van Gulik's Judge Dee stories, which are available in paperback editions by Scribner's, Dover, and The University of Chicago Press.

15. Hsia Chih-yen [pseud.], *The Coldest Winter of Peking: A Novel from Inside China,* trans. Liang-lao Dee (New York: Doubleday, 1978). See also *The Execution of Mayor Yin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

16. Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Random House, 1938); Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950); Simon Leys, *Chinese Shadows* (New York: Viking, 1977); and Vera Schwarcz, *Long Road Home: A China Journal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

17. John Hersey, *A Single Pebble* (New York: Knopf, 1956).

18. James Clavell, *Taipan* (New York: Delacorte, 1983), and Robert S. Elegant, *Dynasty* (New York: Fawcett, 1982).

19. Victor Segalen, *René Leys* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

being unable to bridge the gap between "us" and "them." John Hersey's intriguing 1985 novel *The Call* shows the continuity of this theme.[20]

What then of the changes wrought when we transport a lone Chinese into the Western setting? In this case we seek the possibilities for an assimilation of the Chinese that we deny to ourselves. Charlie Chan, bumbling but usually successful, is the reassuring obverse of Fu Manchu because we are ultimately confident of his deference to the whites around him. The kung fu masters, those lonely, peripatetic heroes, fit safely into the mystique of white Western gunfighters rather than into the crowded, unsettling image of the Chinatown. In its way their intense loneliness is as reassuring as deference because it is firmly rooted in a moralistic code that supports Western society. Similar isolated figures can be placed in Europe or in the ambiguous zones of Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, as Paul Scott, James Farrell, and Han Suyin have done so well.[21] But the potential to use an individual Chinese figure so as to shock the Western reader into illumination comes best from a Chinese writer of power living in the United States and writing about Chinese values: witness the success of Maxine Hong Kingston and the angry, tongue-tied yet articulate central narrator of *The Woman Warrior*.[22] In this work Western white civilization gets transposed into the world of demons and ghosts that haunted her own parents.

I have been speaking of works that are in different ways about China and designed to affect our perceptions. But books set in China do not have to be about China: China can also be a device, a foil, as Voltaire knew. Thus, some of the most famous books set in China are not really about China but are about the author's own politics and should be read and treated as such. I think of two works by André Malraux, *The Conquerors* and *Man's Fate*, in which careful reading shows how rarely the Chinese appear as major actors in the story and how all the statements *about* them are made by other mouths.[23] This is true to an even more obvious extent in Bertolt Brecht's *Good Woman of Setzuan*, in which China is a backdrop with little precise significance.[24] Those who believe that Brecht had some deeper realistic purpose for setting his story in China's huge, fertile, landlocked Western province in the warlord period may have that belief laid to rest by the fact that Brecht, at the time he was

20. John Hersey, *The Call* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

21. See Paul Scott, *The Chinese Love Pavilion* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1960), reprinted in the United States as *The Love Pavilion* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1985); James G. Farrell, *Singapore Grip* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1986); and Han Suyin [pseud.], *A Many Splendoured Thing* (London: J. Cape, 1952).

22. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

23. See André Malraux, *Man's Fate*, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: Modern Library, 1965) and *The Conquerors*, trans. Stephen Becker (New York: Grove Press, 1977).

24. Bertolt Brecht, *Good Woman of Setzuan* (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

writing, thought Szechwan was a town. Kafka's China, too, is totally cerebral even though exquisitely described. It is a world for phantom explorations of loneliness and time. (These explorations may be seen most vividly in his short story "The Great Wall of China.")[25]

Another extraordinary example of a work that uses China as a device is J. G. Ballard's 1984 novel *Empire of the Sun*. Set in the Japanese civilian internment camp in Lunghua, near Shanghai, during World War II, the novel is mainly a profound and brilliant meditation on suffering and will. The mutual tragedies of the Western internees and the Japanese pilots at the adjacent airfield are seen through the eyes of a starving child, Jim, but the Chinese people appear offstage for the most part, as mobs or as silent, dying figures. Near death in an old football stadium where the Japanese transferred their prisoners and their loot, "Jim lay without moving, as the fires from the burning oil depots at Hongkew played across the stands, lighting the doors of the looted refrigerators, the radiator grilles of the white Cadillacs and the lamps of the plaster nymphs in the box of the Generalissimo." This is a world of nightmare, although it is also a country dominated by the Yangtze, "that vast river barely large enough to draw all the dead of China through its mouth."[26]

Ultimately, the images fade even further away from China, perhaps the outer limit being when those studying China are used by a given author to present his feelings for other things. Fine books though they are, Western readers will gain little insight about *China* as a civilization from Joseph Knecht and his search for the tao in Herman Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* and even less from the crazed and broken China scholar Peter Kien, who burns his house, his Chinese library, and himself in the final immolation that is the climax of Elias Canetti's *Auto da fe*.[27] Despite the apparent particularity of China in these works, here the universalization of human life has become complete.

Such ambiguous or bleak images, however, in no way imply that Westerners will not continue to seek to find themselves through China and to inch toward understanding its remarkable people and their culture. Whatever their limitations, it is not adequate to view the majority of these divergent views as solely reflecting the biases within Western culture or a patronizing and exploitative attitude toward Eastern civilizations. Edward Said, who emphasizes the "cognitive imperialism" of Western scholars in his influential and passionate book *Orientalism* leaves out

25. Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China," *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Modern Library, 1952), 129–47.

26. J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 211, 228.

27. Canetti's novel, for which he later received the Nobel Prize in Literature, was first published in 1935 in German as *Die Blendung*. *Auto da fe* was the title he used in England, though an early U.S. edition was titled *Tower of Babel*. See *Auto da fe* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984).

too much of the story.[28] There have been so many twists and turns along the way to depicting China during the last four hundred years that no such broad generalizations can hold. And that is as it should be. No one is easy to understand. And the more blurred and multifaceted our perceptions of China become, the closer we may be to that most elusive thing: the truth.

28. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).