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**The Burning  
Forest**

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**Simon Leys**     ▪

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**ESSAYS ON  
CHINESE CULTURE  
AND POLITICS**  
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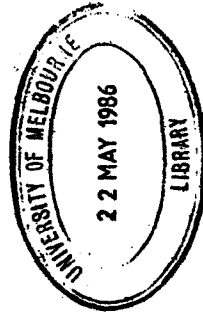
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Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans)

## O R I E N T A L I S M A N D S I N O L O G Y \*

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**E**dward Said's main contention is that "no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim the author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances." Translated into plain English, this would seem to mean simply that no scholar can escape his original condition: his own national, cultural, political, and social prejudices are bound to be reflected in his work. Such a commonsense state-

\* Reply to an inquiry launched by the Asian Studies Association of Australia: scholars involved in different areas of Asian studies were invited to comment on the relevance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1979) to the problems entailed in the approaches and methods of their respective fields.

ment hardly warrants any debate. Actually, Said's own book is an excellent case in point; *Orientalism* could obviously have been written by no one but a Palestinian scholar with a huge chip on his shoulder and a very dim understanding of the European academic tradition (here perceived through the distorted prism of a certain type of American university, with its brutish hyper-specialization, nonhumanistic approach, and close, unhealthy links with government).\*

My task here is not to write a review of *Orientalism* (thank God!), but merely to see whether Said's arguments present any relevance for Chinese studies.

Said seems to include "sinology" implicitly in his concept of "orientalism." (I insist on the word *seems*; the point remains obscure, like a great many other points in his book.) Said's contention is that whenever an orientalist makes a statement in his own specialized area, this statement accrues automatically to the broader picture of a mythical "East." I do not know whether this is true for scholars involved with Near and Middle East studies, but it certainly does not apply to sinologists. The intellectual and physical boundaries of the Chinese world are sharply defined; they encompass a reality that is so autonomous and singular that no sinologist in his right mind would ever dream of extending any sinological statement to the non-Chinese world. For a serious sinologist (or for any thinking person, for that matter) concepts such as "Asia" or "the East" never presented any useful mean-

\* The words "European" and "American" are to be understood here as abstract categories, not as geographical notions. Actually, I wonder to what extent the European academic tradition can still be found in Europe. Quite recently, the Dean of the Asian Studies Faculty of one of the oldest and most prestigious European universities sent me a warm and generous invitation to come and lecture on Chinese classical culture. In his innocence, he added, "As our university has now established with the People's Republic of China an important exchange program, which should not be put in jeopardy, it would be best if your lectures would not touch on contemporary issues." What shocked me most was that he obviously felt this was a perfectly sensible and decent proposition.

ing. No sinologist would ever consider himself an orientalist. (Some sinologists, it is true, may occasionally be seen participating in one of those huge fairs that are periodically held under the name of "International Orientalist Congress," but this is simply because similar junkets undertaken under the mere auspices of the Club Méditerranée would not be tax deductible.)

*Orientalism is a colonialist-imperialist conspiracy:*\* Quite possibly. To some extent, it may also be true for sinology. Who knows? One day it will perhaps be discovered that the best studies on Tang poetry and on Song painting have all been financed by the CIA—a fact that should somehow improve the public image of this much-maligned organization.

*Orientalists hate and despise the Orient; they deny its intellectual existence and try to turn it into a vacuum:* Whether most sinologists love China or hate it is largely irrelevant. One important fact is absolutely evident: Western sinology in its entirety is a mere footnote appended to the huge sinological corpus that Chinese intellectuals have been building for centuries to this day. The Chinese are our first guides and teachers in the exploration of their culture and history; fools who ignore this evidence do so at their own risk and pay dearly for it. Further, it should be noted that today a significant proportion of the leading sinologists in the Western academic world *are* Chinese: through their teaching and research, they play a decisive role in Western sinology.

*The notion of an "other" culture is of questionable use, as it seems to end inevitably in self-congratulation, or hostility and aggression:* Why could it not equally well end in admiration, wonder-

\* The passages in italics summarize various points made by Said (when quotation marks are used, they reproduce his own words). Some readers may rightly feel that my approach to this serious topic is selective, arbitrary, incoherent, and flippant. I could not agree more with such criticism—I merely tried to imitate Said's method.

ment, increased self-knowledge, relativization, and readjustment of one's own values, awareness of the limits of one's own civilization? Actually, most of the time, all of these seem to be the natural outcome of our study of China (and it is also the reason why Chinese should be taught in Western countries as a fundamental discipline of the humanities at the secondary-school level, in conjunction with, or as an alternative to, Latin and Greek). Joseph Needham summed up neatly what is the common feeling of most sinologists: "Chinese civilization presents the irresistible fascination of what is totally 'other,' and only what is totally 'other' can inspire the deepest love, together with a strong desire to know it." From the great Jesuit scholars of the sixteenth century down to the best sinologists of today, we can see that there was never a more powerful antidote to the temptation of Western ethnocentrism than the study of Chinese civilization. (It is not a coincidence that Said, in his denunciation of "illiberal ethnocentrism," found further ammunition for his good fight, in the writings of a *sinologist* who was attacking the naïve and arrogant statement of a French philosopher describing Thomistic philosophy as "gathering up the whole of human tradition." Indignant rejection of such crass provincialism will always come most spontaneously to any sinologist.)

*"Interesting work is more likely to be produced by scholars whose allegiance is to a discipline defined intellectually and not to a field like Orientalism, [which is] defined either canonically, imperially, or geographically":* The sinological field is defined linguistically; for this very reason, the concept of sinology is now being increasingly questioned (actually, in the John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard, I have heard it recently used as a term of abuse). Perhaps we ought to rejoice now as we see more historians, philosophers, students of literature, legal scholars, economists, political scientists, and others venturing into the Chinese field, equipped with all the intellectual tools of

their original disciplines. Still, this new trend is encountering one stubborn and major obstacle that is not likely ever to disappear: no specialist, whatever his area of expertise, can expect to contribute significantly to our knowledge of China without first mastering the Chinese literary language. To be able to read classical and modern Chinese it is necessary to undergo a fairly long and demanding training that can seldom be combined with the acquisition and cultivation of another discipline. For this reason, sinology is bound to survive, in fact, if not necessarily in name, as one global, multidisciplinary, humanistic undertaking, based solely upon a specific language prerequisite. Actually, this situation, imposed by the nature of things, does have its advantages. Chinese civilization has an essentially *holistic* character that condemns all narrowly specialized approaches to grope in the dark and miss their target—as was well illustrated a few years ago by the spectacular blunders of *nearly all* the "contemporary China" specialists. (In this respect, it is ironic to note that it was precisely the so-called Concerned Asian Scholars—on whom Said set so much store in his book, as he saw in them the only chance of redemption for the orientalist establishment—that failed most scandalously in their moral responsibilities toward China and the Chinese people during the Maoist era.)

*"We should question the advisability of too close a relationship between the scholar and the state":* You bet we should! On this point I could not agree more with Said—yet it is hardly an original conclusion. The very concept of the "university" has rested for some seven hundred years on the absolute autonomy and freedom of all academic and scholarly activities from any interference and influence of the political authorities. It is nice to see that Said is now rediscovering such a basic notion; I only deplore that it took him three hundred pages of twisted, obscure, incoherent, ill-informed, and badly written diatribe to reach at last one sound and fundamental truism.