

# Interpretation of Western Images from a Postcolonial Perspective: A Case Study of Antonioni's Documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina*

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**Abstract.** This paper employs textual analysis and postcolonial theory to explore Michelangelo Antonioni's 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina*. The study delves into the film's portrayal of Chinese culture, people, and environment, focusing on how these depictions either reinforce or challenge Western audiences' expectations and prejudices. Antonioni's documentary is analyzed for its use of symbolism, cinematographic techniques, and scene selection in constructing an "exotic" image of China. Through a postcolonial lens, the paper examines how the documentary demonstrates Orientalist perspectives, reflecting Western stereotypes and biases towards China. Furthermore, it explores the broader implications of these representations in the context of cultural exchange and power dynamics. The analysis also considers the historical and political backdrop of the film's production, including the Cultural Revolution and China's efforts to shape its international image. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual media shape and disseminate national images in cross-cultural contexts, highlighting the complexities of postcolonial identity construction and the enduring impact of Orientalism in contemporary visual culture.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Theory, Orientalism, Cultural Depiction.

## 1. Introduction

China, as a major country in the Eastern world, has always been a focal point of Western research. Historically, Western studies on China have largely been based on their own perceptions. In the first half of the 20th century, Edward Said introduced the concept of "Orientalism", proposing that Western perceptions and descriptions of the East were a constructed process filled with power, political, and ideological purposes. Since then, numerous studies have emerged both within and outside China to counter this Western hegemony and continue research on China. Internally, this often involves examining the stereotypes of China under Western discourse.

In "The Ideology and Aesthetic Logic of Visual Representation: The Image of 'The Other' in Local Visual Art" Guo Jianping discusses how the image of the other is constructed in visual art, particularly in pre-globalization works. He argues that Western art often presents the East through beautification or vilification, both of which adhere to the logic of "the other," emphasizing or exaggerating cultural differences to affirm their cultural identity and superiority [1]. For example, Eastern figures are depicted as exotic, barbaric, or mysterious to highlight the "otherness" of the East, thereby underscoring Western cultural and moral superiority.

In "The Cultural Discount Effect in BBC's Documentaries on China", Li Fenfen analyzes how BBC documentaries on China are influenced by cultural discount effects, using specific narrative techniques and visual presentations to convey images of China that align with Western audience expectations and cultural frameworks [2]. These documentaries often selectively present information, shaping an image of China that fits Western mainstream cultural biases, such as emphasizing political repression and lack of freedom while downplaying China's diversity and complexity.

This paper adopts a textual analysis approach, building on previous research, using Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* as a case study. It examines how the film depicts Chinese culture, people, and environment, and how these depictions might solidify or challenge Western audiences' expectations and prejudices. Additionally, it explores how Antonioni's use of symbolism, cinematography, and scene selection serves to construct an "exotic" image of China. Through a

postcolonial lens, it analyzes how Antonioni's *Chung Kuo – Cina* (1972) demonstrates Orientalist perspectives and reflects Western stereotypes and biases toward China.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Orientalism Theory

Orientalism theory was first proposed by Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*, criticizing Western stereotypes and misunderstandings of the East. Said argued that Orientalism is a cultural expression method through which the West constructs a dominant knowledge system about the East, reflecting Western cultural superiority and serving its political and economic interests.

Said identified three main aspects of Orientalism:

(1). Academic Orientalism: Scholars and intellectuals' studies and descriptions of Eastern societies are often biased, reinforcing Western cultural and intellectual control over the East.

(2). Imaginary Orientalism: The construction of Oriental images through literature, art, and everyday discourse, often romanticized, alienated, or demeaning.

(3). Institutional Orientalism: The stereotypes and policy orientations held by governments, businesses, and media in their foreign policies and international interactions, typically to maintain Western global dominance.

Orientalism is not just an expression of misunderstanding or prejudice but an ideological tool devised by Western power structures to maintain economic and political interests over the East [3].

### 2.2. Expansion of Postcolonial Theory

Building on Said's foundation, postcolonial theory has evolved into a broad academic field, including various dimensions and theorists using different tools and perspectives to explore the impact of colonial history and cultural hegemony on former colonies. Homi Bhabha, an important figure in postcolonial theory, focuses on cultural intersection and overlap, known as "hybridity" [4]. Bhabha's "third space" theory examines new forms and identities emerging from cultural exchanges and collisions, proposing a method to understand and evaluate the influence of intercultural interactions, especially in the context of globalization. Gayatri Spivak's theory concentrates on the voices of marginalized and politically sidelined groups. Her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* explores how oppressed groups (e.g., Indian women) in colonial texts can find ways to express their voices [5]. Spivak criticizes Western scholars for potentially exacerbating marginalization when representing the "other." Postcolonial theory also examines how cultural resistance and identity reconstruction counter Western centrism. These theories emphasize how marginalized groups maintain cultural specificity or engage in cultural hybridity to resist.

### 2.3. "The Other" in Images and Visual Culture

Within postcolonial theory, studying the representation of "the other" in images reveals how cultural politics and power structures are formed and expressed in visual media. These representations reflect the ideologies and aesthetic values of the culture creating the images and showing how they use visual language to construct and understand characters from foreign or different cultures.

#### 2.3.1. Cultural Politics of Images

In visual culture, images of "the other" are constructed using specific visual and artistic means, including symbols, color use, composition, and other visual elements. These images often play a role in silently conveying the distinction between "us" and "them," with "them" frequently depicted as groups divergent from the dominant culture's norms. This reinforces particular narratives about "the other", often aligning with the political and cultural agendas of the dominant culture.

### 2.3.2. Aesthetic Logic and Ideology

The process of creating the image of the "other" involves aesthetic logic and ideology. Aesthetic logic concerns the artistic expression method of images, attracting viewers through particular styles or aesthetics to convey cultural values [6]. Ideology involves the deep-seated cultural beliefs and political credos that these images support or reflect, such as notions about race, gender, class, and power.

### 2.3.3. Interaction of Culture and Power

Postcolonial theory emphasizes that visual representation of "the other" is not merely a part of cultural expression but a product of the interaction between culture and power. These images allow the dominant culture to shape, reinforce, or rewrite the cultural identity and history of marginalized groups, invisibly maintaining or challenging existing social order and power relations [7]. In today's globalized world with increasing intercultural exchanges, this dynamic is particularly significant, as images and media play a crucial role in cross-cultural understanding and misunderstanding.

## 3. Background and Content Analysis of *Chung Kuo - Cina*

### 3.1. Background of the Documentary's Filming

Film, as a medium, serves significantly as a propaganda tool. Since its inception, documentaries have been used by governments to mobilize or suppress public sentiment, especially during wartime [8]. In 1934, German female director Leni Riefenstahl made the highly influential documentary *Triumph of the Will*, greatly boosting German wartime morale. Similarly, during World War II, the Allies employed John Grierson to coordinate and use documentaries for propaganda, with Joris Ivens' *The 400 Million* being a notable example.

The documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* was filmed in 1972 during China's Cultural Revolution. The Chinese government hoped the film would present a positive image of China to the world. This period also marked China's gradual reopening to international relations, including Nixon's visit and the normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan, enhancing China's international status.

Renowned Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni was invited to make this documentary. Despite being invited, Antonioni had significant creative freedom due to his influence and unique style. He considered himself "a traveler with a camera", favoring objective recording over didactic or political propaganda.

### 3.2. Structure Analysis of the Film

The first part mainly focuses on Beijing, showcasing iconic sites such as Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, highlighting China's political center and cultural heritage.

The second part shifts to Henan's Linxian and cities like Suzhou and Nanjing, focusing on people's daily lives and work, such as the Hongqi Canal project and rural collective life.

The third part centers on Shanghai, depicting the lifestyle and social scenery of its citizens, including teahouses, factories, and street life, reflecting the city's commercial and industrial aspects [9].

### 3.3. Detailed Interpretation of Key Scenes and Symbolism

The documentary includes significant scenes like Tiananmen Square, Hongqi Canal, and old alleys in Shanghai, symbolizing China's political and social life. Antonioni pays special attention to people's expressions and daily behaviors, using close-ups to show the lifestyle and emotions of Chinese people at that time [10]. Many scenes and characters in the film carry deep symbolic meanings. For instance, the Hongqi Canal symbolizes collectivism and self-reliance, while Shanghai's teahouses and streets represent urbanization and modernization. Antonioni attempts to convey a more comprehensive and complex image of China rather than the singular positive image the government intended.

Although the documentary faced criticism from Chinese audiences and the government for deviating from the expected portrayal, it provides a unique and valuable perspective on the early 1970s China from a contemporary viewpoint.

#### **4. Postcolonial Analysis of Images and Narratives**

As previously mentioned, Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* was filmed during the early years of China's founding and the Cultural Revolution. Antonioni had significant autonomy in this work, allowing a postcolonial perspective to reveal deeper cultural and political meanings. Postcolonial theory often explores Western descriptions and constructions of the East, and Antonioni's work offers a unique Western perspective on observing and documenting China at that time.

##### **4.1. Scene Selection**

Antonioni carefully chose scenes showcasing both urban and rural China in his documentary. Urban scenes focus on industrial progress, modern architecture, and bustling streets, highlighting China's efforts and achievements in becoming a modern state. In contrast, rural scenes, often more rustic and traditional, reflect China's deep cultural roots and agrarian society. This contrast not only shows China's diversity but also possibly reflects Western notions of China's developmental imbalances.

The documentary includes many historically significant sites like the Great Wall and the Forbidden City. These sites symbolize China's long history and culture, while simultaneously, modern factories and educational institutions are shown to explore how China retains its traditions while embracing modernization.

##### **4.2. Symbolism**

The frequent use of red in the film not only represents Chinese tradition but also symbolizes communism. Red signifies revolutionary and political passion, and it is the hallmark color of the Cultural Revolution, representing intense social and political changes.

The selection and portrayal of characters, especially workers, peasants, and students, symbolize the nation's future and revolutionary hope. By showcasing their active roles in social construction, Antonioni emphasizes the importance of ordinary people in national development.

The documentary explores the interaction between technological advancement and natural landscapes. This reflection on human-environment relations shows China's reliance on natural resources and the potential environmental impact of industrial progress.

From a postcolonial perspective, Antonioni's *Chung Kuo - Cina* is not merely an external observation of a country but a blend of cultural exchange and political ideology. This analysis helps us understand how the West constructs its perception of the East through images and how this perception shapes our understanding of history and culture. Through this lens, the documentary becomes part of cultural dialogue and historical recording.

##### **4.3. Antonioni's Perspective and Narrative Strategy**

Michelangelo Antonioni, through his unique perspective and narrative strategies in the documentary, shaped a multifaceted view of China. The Italian director's choice of camera angles, editing, and narrative style provides a rich and complex Chinese image.

From a narrative standpoint, Antonioni showcased China's urban-rural contrast during filming. This approach highlights China's economic and social development and reveals the stark differences between urban and rural areas. This selective display helps construct a specific "China image" that encompasses the blend of tradition and modernity and reflects the social contradictions and cultural conflicts during rapid changes.

In editing, Antonioni often uses long shots to emphasize the relationship between the environment and characters. The slow-paced display increases scene immersion, allowing the audience to deeply understand and feel the social environment in China. This technical choice makes the film more than a documentary, conveying emotions and philosophy.

Regarding the director's intent and audience reaction, Antonioni likely aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of China, breaking away from common stereotypes in news reports. His goal was to promote cultural understanding and exchange through imagery. The Western audience's reception might have been mixed; some might find the film educational and enlightening, appreciating China's diversity and complexity, while others, due to cultural differences and values, might misunderstand or question certain content.

#### 4.4. Orientalist Expressions in the Image

In Antonioni's documentary, the Orientalist expressions through symbols and symbolism, scene selection, and the combination of images and text form a unique narrative about China. These expressions reflect the director's artistic viewpoint and reveal certain inherent Western impressions of China.

The film features iconic sites like the Great Wall and Tiananmen Square, which not only represent China's culture and history but also reinforce specific narratives about China. For instance, the Great Wall symbolizes China's ancient and resilient nature and can be interpreted as a symbol of isolation and protection. Tiananmen Square, as a political and cultural center, often connects themes of power, order, and mass mobilization in the film. Through these symbols, Antonioni strengthens the narrative of China as a country with a profound history and culture facing modern challenges.

Antonioni carefully selected various scenes, such as markets, schools, factories, and rural areas, to display China's diversity and "exoticism." These scenes not only show different aspects of Chinese society but also potentially reinforce Western stereotypes about China. For instance, rural scenes might be romanticized as pristine utopias, while market scenes could be depicted as lively yet chaotic, reinforcing Western views of China as a country full of contrasts and contradictions.

Text elements in the film, like subtitles and narration, combined with visual elements, deepen the audience's specific understanding of China. Text is often used to provide background information, explain cultural phenomena, or guide audience perception. For example, the narration might emphasize certain scenes' historical significance or cultural symbolism, forming deeper understanding and associations based on visual impressions. In this way, text and images work together to enhance narrative depth, potentially reinforcing certain Orientalist viewpoints, and portraying China as a country that needs to be "explained" and "understood".

Antonioni's narrative strategy and visual presentation make his work a significant case for exploring how Orientalism is constructed and expressed in modern visual culture.

#### 4.5. Visual Construction of Stereotypes and Prejudices

The reproduction of stereotypes through specific imagery and narrative techniques often reinforces Western viewers' preconceived notions of China in this film. The film captures many Chinese people with impersonal, devout expressions and monotonous clothing, reflecting a Western perspective of "collectivism." Additionally, Antonioni's portrayal of Chinese society rarely involves personal stories or deep emotional expressions, recording more from a detached observer's standpoint.

Compared to other Western documentaries of the same period, such as some BBC documentaries on China, Antonioni's *Chung Kuo - Cina* appears more objective and neutral. BBC documentaries might focus more on political issues and cultural conflicts, thereby showcasing Western concerns about China's political and social problems. Antonioni's work reveals a pure observer's perspective, avoiding direct commentary or political analysis, a rarity among contemporary Western documentaries.

Modern audiences might critique the stereotypes expressed in *Chung Kuo - Cina*. With globalization and deeper cultural exchanges, modern viewers are more aware of the inappropriate

aspects of certain stereotypes in the film, such as oversimplifying China's image to political slogans and collective actions. This critique helps reevaluate the film's cultural and ideological significance, understanding how images shape and disseminate national images.

## 5. Postcolonial Analysis of Images and Narratives

### 5.1. Expression and Construction of Cultural Symbols

In Antonioni's documentary, the expression of Chinese and Western identities is captured through the lens showcasing China's daily life, landscapes, architecture, and customs, presenting an attractive yet unfamiliar Eastern world. These visual symbols carry rich cultural information, reflecting China's unique cultural identity. Meanwhile, Western cultural symbols are also implicit in the film's perspective, such as photography techniques and narrative methods, representing Western cultural aesthetics and ideologies.

The film attempts to present a real China through detailed depictions of Chinese daily life. However, this presentation inevitably carries Western viewers' presumptions and expectations. By observing Chinese society, the film constructs an "other" image, representing both an acknowledgement of Chinese culture and a silent reaffirmation of Western cultural superiority.

### 5.2. Comparison of Differences and Similarities between China and the West

Antonioni's lens captures many elements of Chinese culture distinct from Western culture, such as square dancing, market transactions, and traditional rituals. These elements highlight significant differences between China and the West in daily life, social structure, and cultural customs. The film emphasizes these differences, reinforcing the mystery and "otherness" of the East.

Despite focusing on differences, some scenes also reveal human commonalities. Depictions of family life, daily work of laborers, and children's play showcase shared human emotions and lifestyles, bridging the gap between China and the West to some extent.

### 5.3. Participation in Postcolonial Identity Construction

Antonioni presents an external image of China through visual symbols, reflecting Western curiosity and misunderstanding of Eastern culture. This presentation not only reproduces Chinese culture but also constructs an "other" image that aligns with Western aesthetics and ideologies, highlighting the political and cultural significance of these visual symbols.

The film, as a visual medium, serves as both a tool for cultural expression and a reflection of power structures. By documenting Chinese images, the film reinforces Western power as the observer and interpreter. However, it also provides a platform for Western audiences to access a different cultural perspective, challenging Western cultural centrality and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

Through the exhibition and construction of cultural symbols, Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* reflects the process of identity construction between China and the West. While showcasing differences and similarities, the film participates in the complex interaction of postcolonial identity construction, revealing power structures and cultural politics in visual culture. Through this, the film becomes not just a record of China but a profound reflection on Sino-Western cultural relations.

## 6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, it is demonstrated how imagery functions in cultural exchange and power structures. The documentary is not only a record of early 1970s Chinese society but also a cultural transmission and political interpretation for Western audiences. Antonioni, through carefully chosen scenes, symbolic visual symbols, and unique narrative strategies, presents a complex and multifaceted image of China. However, this image, to some extent, is influenced by Orientalism, reflecting Western stereotypes and cultural biases towards China.

Antonioni's *Chung Kuo - Cina* presents the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western cultures, revealing the power position of the West as observers and interpreters. While showcasing China's diversity, the film participates in the construction and reproduction of cultural identity, reflecting the complexities of postcolonial Sino-Western relations. Although the film might inadvertently reinforce certain stereotypes, it also offers a platform to enhance Western understanding and reflection on China.

In conclusion, Antonioni's documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina* is not only a historically significant visual work but also a critical case in postcolonial studies. It reveals the power dynamics in visual culture, showing how images shape and spread national images in cross-cultural exchanges. Through such analysis, deeper insights are gained into the cultural and political significance of the documentary, allowing for better reflection on how to construct more equal and respectful cultural exchange models in a globalized context.

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