

Translation and Reconstruction of the Chinese Image in *The Painted Veil* from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract: This study, grounded in the theoretical framework of postcolonialism and employing discourse analysis and comparative translation studies, systematically investigates the contradictory image of China as portrayed in Somerset Maugham's novel *The Painted Veil* and its reconstruction mechanisms across three Chinese translations from different historical periods. The research reveals that Maugham's original work employs Orientalist narrative strategies to construct China as a binary opposition between the "barbaric Other" and a "spiritual utopia." Through a dynastic comparison of the three translations by Liu Xianzhi (1988), Ruan Jinglin (2006), and Wang Jinhua (2021), this paper delineates the dynamic evolution of China's image from an object of gaze to a process of subjective reconstruction. Translation practice emerges as a critical arena for cultural power negotiation, where translators engage in differentiated reconstructions of China's image through vocabulary selection, shifts in narrative perspective, and ideological adjustments within specific historical contexts. This research not only deepens the understanding of postcolonial translation theory but also provides theoretical insights and practical pathways for deconstructing Western cultural hegemony and fostering equitable intercultural dialogue in the era of globalization.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, *The Painted Veil*, Image of China, Translation Reconstruction.

1. Introduction

The Painted Veil, a classic novel by British author William Somerset Maugham, is set against the narrative backdrop of colonial-era Hong Kong and Mei-tan-fu in the 1920s. Through the gaze of the British female protagonist Kitty, it constructs an exotic yet internally contradictory oriental world. The novel not only depicts an individual's spiritual journey through betrayal and moral redemption but also, on a deeper level, reflects the complex dynamics of power relations between East and West within a colonial context. With sophisticated narrative techniques, Maugham shapes China into a "Other" that is both fearsome and alluring. As a core concept in postcolonial theory, the "Other" stands in opposition to the "Self". The Western process of constructing the Other involves both the projective imagination of the exotic and a dialectical reflection on its own limitations [1]. This paradoxical construction precisely embodies the mechanisms of Orientalist discourse critiqued by Edward Said, where the Orient consistently exists as the antithesis of Western subjective cognition, and its image is shaped to serve the narrative purpose of Western cultural self-affirmation.

Employing postcolonial theory as its analytical framework, and integrating methods of discourse analysis and comparative translation studies, this paper delves into the logic behind the construction of the Chinese image in *The Painted Veil* and its mechanisms of reconstruction during the process of translation into Chinese. The research aims to reveal: firstly, how Maugham participates in the production and reproduction of Orientalist discourse through literary narrative; secondly, how Chinese translators from different historical periods engage in dialogue and negotiation with colonial discourse within their translation practices; and thirdly, how the cross-cultural reconstruction of China's image reflects shifts in local socio-cultural contexts and the awakening of subjective consciousness. Through this multidimensional analysis, the study seeks to provide theoretical insights into understanding the politics of

translation, the operational mechanisms of cultural power, and the construction of equitable cultural dialogue within a globalized context.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Theoretical Convergence of Postcolonialism and Translation Studies

2.1. The Core Tenets of Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, gradually evolving into a systematic body of academic critical discourse alongside the disintegration of the global colonial system and the independence of newly established nation-states. This theory is fundamentally concerned with the reflection upon and critique of cultural relations and hegemonic issues between empire, nation, the local, and the global [2]. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said profoundly revealed the operational logic of Orientalism as a mechanism of discursive power: the West establishes its own cultural superiority and legitimacy of rule by constructing an image of the Orient as its opposite. Within this binary cognitive framework, the Orient is essentialized as the backward, mysterious, and irrational Other, while the West is endowed with positive attributes of civilization, rationality, and progress [4].

2.2. The Postcolonial Turn in Translation Studies

In the 1970s, translation studies underwent a profound cultural turn, leading to unprecedented theoretical activity and a diversification of research perspectives. Within this theoretical paradigm, the nature of translation is redefined: it is no longer seen as a mere transference of linguistic signs but rather as a dynamic arena where cultural power relations are negotiated [3]. Postcolonial translation theory pays particular attention to the role translation has played in colonial history

and how it participates in the construction and reconstruction of cultural identities. Translation serves not only as a bridge for cross-cultural communication but also as a crucial site of cultural power struggle. The choices made by translators in the translation process often reflect specific ideological stances and cultural-political aspirations.

2.3. Construction of the Theoretical Analytical Framework

Based on the aforementioned theoretical resources, this paper constructs a three-dimensional, integrated analytical framework. Firstly, this framework employs discourse analysis to investigate the mechanisms of constructing China's image in the source text. Secondly, it delves into the level of translation strategy, analyzing the specific choices made by translators in terms of lexicon, syntax, and narrative. Finally, it focuses on the ideological dimension, interpreting the deeper cultural-political implications concealed behind these choices. This framework aims to unveil the complex layers of the Chinese image in *The Painted Veil* and trace the trajectory of its dynamic transformation during its cross-cultural journey.

3. The Construction of Binary Opposition in China's Image in the Original Text

3.1. The "Barbaric Other": The Oriental Mirror of Poverty and Backwardness

Within the narrative structure of *The Painted Veil*, China is initially presented as an exotic space rife with poverty, disease, and death. Through Kitty's gaze, Maugham depicts Hong Kong and Mei-tan-fu as a frightening world of the "Other":

"She hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house off the Victoria Road in which they were in the habit of meeting." [5]

In this description, the concentrated use of pejorative terms such as "hated," "nervous," and "filthy" constructs a repulsive image of a Chinese city. This negative representation not only reflects Kitty's personal cultural prejudice but, on a deeper level, embodies the systematic Othering of the Orient within colonialist discourse. Through environmental descriptions in the spatial narrative—such as the "stricken city" (a city ravaged by plague) and "new coffin" (an eerie coffin)—Maugham ossifies China as the antithesis of Western modernity, making it a symbol of barbarism, backwardness, and chaos.

It is noteworthy that the construction of this negative image deviates significantly from historical reality, a causation Maugham never truly grapples with. To a certain extent, it was precisely Western-initiated events like the Opium War and subsequent acts of aggression that contributed to China's economic underdevelopment and political oppression [7]. However, in Maugham's narrative, the responsibility of Western colonial history is completely erased, and China's backwardness is presented as an essentialized cultural characteristic. This simultaneously reflects Maugham's own attitude towards China: he observed it from behind a veil, never truly seeking to empathize with this "Other" of Western culture [8]. Consequently, the China depicted in his novel is a product born from the collision and fusion of collective Western imaginings and his personal, albeit limited, experiences.

3.2. "Spiritual Utopia": The Oriental Illusion of Mystical Salvation

In stark contrast to the negative imagery, Maugham simultaneously constructs China as a spiritual utopia brimming with mystical wisdom and ancient civilization. This construction is primarily achieved through three narrative dimensions:

Firstly, through aestheticized depictions of the natural landscape. Even in cholera-stricken Mei-tan-fu, Maugham employs imagery such as temples and rivers to create an aesthetic space transcending tangible suffering: "the temple stood like a dream in the midst of the surrounding desolation" [5]. This aesthetic treatment transforms China from a specific geographical space into an abstract spiritual symbol.

Secondly, through the characterization of exotic figures. The figure of the Manchu princess becomes a concentrated embodiment of Eastern mystique: "her green silk gown and her jet-black eyes" [5]. Through detailed descriptions of external features like clothing and appearance, Maugham shapes the Eastern woman into an alluringly exotic "Other", catering to the curiosity of Western readers.

Most importantly, through the introduction of Taoist philosophy. Through the character Waddington, Maugham expounds on his understanding of the "Tao": "It is the Way and the Waygoer. It is everything and nothing" [5]. This philosophical representation constructs China as a space of spiritual salvation surpassing Western rationalism, offering a value system for Western civilization mired in a crisis of modernity.

3.3. The Ideological Function of the Contradictory Construction

This binary opposition in constructing China's image is not merely a reflection of Maugham's personal aesthetic preference but serves specific ideological functions. On one hand, by portraying China as a poverty-stricken and backward "Other", Maugham reinforces the superiority of Western civilization and the legitimacy of colonial rule. On the other hand, by constructing China as a spiritual utopia, Maugham provides an imagined solution to the crisis of Western modernity. This very contradiction exemplifies the inherent tension within Orientalist discourse: the Orient is simultaneously the savage "Other" in need of "civilizing" and a spiritual wellspring capable of saving the West.

4. The Reconstruction of China's Image in Translation: A Diachronic Comparative Analysis

4.1. Research Methodology and Selection of Translated Versions

The translation process of *The Painted Veil* is, in essence, a textual practice of negotiation between a "China under the Western gaze" within a Western discursive system and the subjectivity of the indigenous culture. Ultimately, the so-called blueprint for cultural export from the West is but a pretense for Westernizing formerly colonized cultures [6]. This study employs a diachronic comparative analysis of three representative Chinese translations of *The Painted Veil*: Liu Xianzhi's *The Colored Veil* (1988), Ruan Jinglin's *The Painted Veil* (2006), and Wang Jinhua's *The Painted Veil* (2021). These three versions correspond to distinct historical stages in China's social development: the early period of

Reform and Opening-up, the period of deepening market economy, and the new era of globalization, thereby providing ideal textual samples for examining the historical evolution of China's image reconstruction.

4.2. Reconstruction Strategies at the Lexical Level

4.2.1. Attenuation and Intensification of Negative Vocabulary

Example 1: Differences in Translating Environmental Descriptions

Original: It was very difficult at Hong-Kong. She hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house off the Victoria Road in which they were in the habit of meeting. [5]

Liu's Translation: 在清廷市, 她的活动并不随便, 因此她恨透了这座中国城市。以前, 她跟汤森总是到维多利亚路旁边的一所小房子里幽会。每次走进进那所肮脏的房子, 她总感到心神不安。[10]

Ruan's Translation: 在香港他们的交往总是这样难。她不喜欢这座中国城市, 每当她来到域多利道旁他们常见面的肮脏的小房子时, 她就抑制不住地紧张。[11]

Wang's Translation: 在香港, 他们这种私下的来往并不容易。吉蒂讨厌这座中国城市。她和唐生惯常幽会的地儿是在域多利道旁的一间又小又脏的房子里, 每次去那儿, 她心里都感到紧张。[12]

Comparing the lexical differences related to colonial perspectives and China's image across these translations aids in exploring the cultural underpinnings of Sino-Western conflicts and provides a basis for a deeper understanding of cultural differences and social psychology. [9] These three Chinese versions reflect shifts in China's social context across different eras. Taking the translation of "hated" as an example, the progression from "恨透" (to detest utterly) to "不喜欢" (to dislike) and then to "讨厌" (to find unpleasant/detest) shows a decreasing intensity of emotion, reflecting the translators' varying attitudes towards colonial discourse. Liu Xianzhi's translation (1990s) retains the fictional place name "清廷" and amplifies "hated" into "恨透", embodying the depoliticization strategies and didactic tradition of the early Reform and Opening-up period. Entering the new century, Ruan Jinglin and Wang Jinhau restore the place name to "香港" (Hong Kong) and attenuate the emotional word to "不喜欢" and "讨厌" respectively. This not only aligns with the historical process of Hong Kong's return but also reflects a shift in Chinese society from collective norms towards individual experience. In translating the street name, Liu uses the Mandarin-based transliteration "维多利亚路" (Weiduoliya Lu), whereas Ruan and Wang adopt the Cantonese-based transliteration "域多利道" (Wikdolei Dou). This highlights the awakening of Hong Kong's cultural subjectivity post-1990s and underscores the political connotations inherent in translation within a postcolonial context.

4.2.2. Cultural Transformation of Religious Vocabulary

Example 2: The gods had been brought out from the abandoned temples and placed in the streets; offerings were laid before them and sacrifices made, but they did not stay the plague. [5]

Liu's Translation: 神像从颓垣断壁的破庙里抬出来, 置放在街上, 神像前摆满了供品, 人们还杀了牲畜献祭, 但

这些神灵并不能阻止瘟疫蔓延。[10]

Ruan's Translation: 废弃庙宇里的佛像被搬到了大街上, 跟前摆满了供品, 人们做了祭祀, 然而丝毫没有效果。[11]

Wang's Translation: 人们从废弃的寺庙中搬出佛像, 放在街上, 在它们面前摆上贡品, 祭祀, 可它们并没能阻止瘟疫的蔓延。[12]

In this translation, Liu Xianzhi renders "the gods" as "神像" (idols/images of gods) and amplifies "sacrifices made" into "杀了牲畜献祭" (slaughtered livestock as sacrifices). By accentuating a grim and barbaric Eastern spectacle, this approach caters to the Western perspective of exotic curiosity while simultaneously resonating with the contemporary discourse critiquing feudal superstition. In contrast, both Ruan Jinglin and Wang Jinhua specify "the gods" as "佛像" (Buddha statues). Ruan's "做了祭祀" (conducted sacrifices) and Wang's "祭祀" (sacrifices) employ reduction translation by omitting the specific action of "sacrifices made", thereby diluting the bloody nature of the ritual and diminishing the colonizer's emphasis on a "barbaric East," reframing it as a cultural practice. The shift of "the gods" from the generalized "神像" to the specific "佛像" reflects a change in the translators' perception of Chinese cultural subjectivity. The translation of "sacrifices made" evolving from the sanguine "杀了牲畜献祭" to the neutral "祭祀" demonstrates a conscious effort to dissolve the stereotypical image of a savage East embedded within colonial discourse.

4.3. Mechanisms of Narrative Perspective Reconstruction

4.3.1. The Localized Transformation of Philosophical Concepts

Example 3: Differences in Interpreting the "Tao"

Original: It is a square without angles, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form. [5]

Liu's Translation: 它主张形无其形, 物无其物, 心无其心。[10]

Ruan's Translation: 可以说它是方形却没有棱角, 是声音却不为耳朵所听见, 是张画像却看不见线条和色彩。[11]

Wang's Translation: 道为方, 却无棱角; 道为声, 却无由听到; 道为象, 却无形无状。[12]

Faced with the source text's attempt to define Eastern philosophy using Western concrete concepts like "square" and "sound", the three translators demonstrate cultural stances characteristic of their respective eras. Liu's translation adopts a strategy of deep domestication, replacing images like "square without angles" with classical Daoist phraseology such as "形无其形" (form without form) and "物无其物" (thing without thing). By employing an archaic, four-character structure, it transforms the Western philosophical expression into Chinese philosophical thought. Ruan's translation faithfully reproduces the original text's parallel structure and paradoxical expressions, such as "方形却没有棱角" (square yet without angles), preserving the mystique and romantic imagination of the East from a Western perspective. This approach reflects a more open-minded attitude towards cultural exchange, as indigenous cultural narratives are inherently rooted in specific historical contexts and social values, respecting the poetic context of the original work [13]. Wang's translation seeks a balance, maintaining the original tripartite structure while incorporating a Chinese

philosophical sensibility by adding “Tao” as the subject and simplifying phrases to “道为声，却无由听到” (Tao is sound, yet cannot be heard). This strategy neither fully accepts Orientalism nor completely obscures the Other’s perspective, attempting instead to establish an equitable dialogue between fidelity and domestication. The evolution from Liu’s cultural defensiveness, to Ruan’s respect for the source text, and finally to Wang’s conscious dialogue clearly mirrors the trajectory of the Chinese cultural mindset progressing from introspection, through openness, to self-awareness.

4.4. The Interaction between Translator Subjectivity and Ideology

4.4.1. Liu Xianzhi: The Sense of Mission as a Cultural Enlightener

A particular history and culture represents a worldview. The different worldviews and formative experiences possessed by translators inevitably lead to distinct horizons of expectation, thereby resulting in translations of varying styles [14]. This illustrates that translators play a crucial role in the process of reconstructing the image of the Other. Graduated from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Fudan University in 1964, Liu Xianzhi’s translation embodies the cultural enlightenment mission of intellectuals during the early Reform and Opening-up period. By employing foreignization strategies to retain the exoticism of the source text, he allows Chinese readers to directly confront the image of China as portrayed in Western literature. This approach reflects both respect for Western literature and aligns with the intellectual circles’ esteem for authentic literary works at the time.

4.4.2. Ruan Jinglin: Cultural Compromise in the Marketization Era

Ruan Jinglin’s translation was published in 2006, coinciding with the deepening period of China’s market economy. In response to the commercial success brought by the film adaptation, Ruan’s translation adopts more domestication strategies, simplifying sentences and downplaying colonial overtones to accommodate the reading habits of the general public. This translational choice reflects the compromising and pragmatic considerations of cultural dissemination in the marketization era.

4.4.3. Wang Jinhua: The Construction of Subjectivity in a Postcolonial Context

Wang Jinhua’s translation demonstrates the conscious awakening of cultural subjectivity among Chinese translators in the 21st century. Adopting a postcolonial critical stance, he consciously weakens the colonial superiority inherent in the original work and reconstructs the subjectivity of China’s image through linguistic manipulation. This translation strategy is not merely a rewriting of the source text but a re-inscription of the cultural power structure.

5. Conclusion

Utilizing postcolonial theory as an analytical lens, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the construction logic of China’s image in *The Painted Veil* and its diachronic evolution within the field of Chinese translation. The core findings reveal that Maugham’s original work skillfully employs Orientalist narrative strategies to shape China into a paradoxical entity, simultaneously embodying the “savage Other” and a “spiritual utopia”. This binary, imaginative

construction essentially functions as an ideological tool for Western cultural self-affirmation and legitimization. Through a meticulous comparative analysis of three representative translations, by Liu Xianzhi (1988), Ruan Jinglin (2006), and Wang Jinhua (2021)-this study clearly delineates the evolutionary trajectory of China’s image from an object of the gaze towards subjective construction. This dynamic evolution not only signifies the awakening of translator subjectivity but also reflects a profound projection of the shifting socio-cultural context of China onto translation practice. Translation here transcends mere linguistic transference, ascending to become a tense arena of cultural power negotiation. The translators’ lexical choices, narrative reconstructions, and ideological adjustments collectively participate in the differential reshaping of China’s image.

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