

Yellow Horde, Forbidden City and Fertile Earth:  
How Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western Fiction Imagined China through the Kaleidoscope of Exoticism,  
Modernity, and Imperialism

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2011

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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**Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Richard King, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies  
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Dr. Yvonne Hsieh, Department of French  
**Outside Member**

# Abstract

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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China inspired and fascinated the Western early-20th-century author. Some, like Pearl S. Buck, writing about a China where she grew up and lived for many years, offered careful, portraits of the Chinese people she loved. Others, such as Fu Manchu creator Sax Rohmer, depicted China as an evil empire and the Chinese as cruel and dangerous criminal masterminds. French author Victor Segalen saw China as the last crumbling frontier of an elusive exotic world that existed in stark contrast to the suffocating modernity and alienation of Europe.

This thesis project examines three specific examples of Western literature about China from the early twentieth century: British author Sax Rohmer, whose depictions of exaggeratedly evil Oriental villains reinforced Western fears of the Chinese Other; French writer Victor Segalen whose mystical portraits of a magnificent Chinese Empire served as the basis for his artistic manifesto on exoticism, and Pearl S. Buck, whose portrayals of sympathetic Chinese peasants helped shift American popular opinion and foreign policy. These three authors, though their styles, approaches and motives varied greatly, all feature the intersecting themes of exoticism, modernity and imperialism. The tensions between these three elements play out in different ways in each chapter of this thesis, and yet all three are examples of exotic writing about China at a time when exoticism was a lost cause, or as Chris Bongie describes it, “an idea with no future” (15). In these examples, imperialism still coloured perceptions of a racially distinct other, and modernity’s inevitability made imagining the exotic a depressing, frightening or naïvely hopeful exercise. In all three examples, this results in an exoticism that seeks to extend the boundaries of what had become a shrinking frontier. Some of the authors succeed in balancing the tensions between exoticism, imperialism and modernity, but in general most do not, and the texts remain deeply conflicted.

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# Introduction

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One afternoon in 1797, Samuel Taylor Coleridge awoke from a famous laudanum-induced nap and penned the following words:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

The story of the poem's creation—how the poem itself appeared to him fully completed in a dream—is well-known. Less well-known, perhaps, is how smoothly the trail of Coleridge's inspiration can be traced back nearly four centuries and across two continents, from Somerset in South West England to the plains of Inner Mongolia.

Although Coleridge makes his Xanadu sound like a mythical fantasy world, it was in fact a real place. The Inner Mongolia city of Shangdu was founded by Yuan dynasty emperor Kublai Khan in 1263, purportedly visited by Marco Polo in the mid-thirteenth century, abandoned in 1420 and named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012. How is it that a British poet, too sickly to travel much further than continental Europe, could write about a distant place he had never seen?

Coleridge explains, in the preamble to “Kubla Khan”, that prior to falling asleep, he had been reading Samuel Purchas' seventeenth-century travel compendium *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. According to Coleridge, he was inspired by the following line from Purchas: “Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were inclosed with a wall” (Coleridge 156). Like Coleridge, Purchas had not been to China either. His description of the Khan's summer palace comes from the already 300 year-old writing of an earlier traveler to China—the Venetian Marco Polo (and, although it was generally accepted at the time that Polo did visit China, some scholars today, most notably

Frances Wood in *Did Marco Polo Go to China?*, claim that Marco Polo's travels were not first-hand, but also based on an earlier source).

Marco Polo's *Travels* offers the following description of the Khan's summer palace at Xanadu:

A further three days' ride takes the traveller to a city named Xanadu built for the present Great Khan, Kublai Khan. Here there is a stone and marble palace with gilded rooms wonderfully decorated with magnificent and delicate paintings of birds, trees and flowers of every kind. Leading away from the palace is a wall which encloses sixteen miles of fertile ground with rivers and streams running through it" (Bellonci and Polo 61).

Thus Coleridge, inspired by Purchas—himself inspired by Polo—wrote about a time and a place he had never visited, transforming that place into a mythical, fantastical world, and blending it (as he does later in the poem) with elements from other, unrelated distant lands and equally unrelated Christian symbology. Four centuries later, transformed into poetry, a Yuan dynasty emperor's summer palace becomes a 'pleasuredome', the rivers and streams become 'the sacred river Alph' and the trees become 'incense-bearing'.

Such was the nature of the exotic. A faraway place could be transformed, through literature, poetry or art, into a place where pleasure and sensuality ruled, nature was sacred and intoxicating scents wafted through the air. Like many Europeans, Coleridge was fascinated and inspired by a distant world he knew vaguely as 'the Orient'. This 'Orient' was a land of mystery, where the distinctions between different cultures, nations and even geographical locations mattered little. The Orient could be China, Japan, Burma or a place vaguely resembling the setting of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. It could include elements from all those vastly different cultures mixed together as dictated by the scope of the author's knowledge and his creative impulse.

When Marco Polo's *Travels* began circulating in Europe, 14<sup>th</sup>-century readers were inspired by the advanced, prosperous and politically unified land Polo described—in contrast to war-torn and fractured Europe—as well as his thoroughly flattering portrait of Kublai Khan as a powerful, diplomatically-gifted monarch. Marco Polo's China was everything that his degenerate, war-torn Venice was not.

Later, when the Jesuits arrived in China, they described a place where the Confucian ethic created an ordered society, as opposed to their fragmented and quarrelling Europe. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the writings of the Jesuits provided Europe with a different, more learned portrait of

China—albeit one written with the clear intention of persuading their supporters of the validity of their methods. In their efforts to evangelize China, the Jesuits believed it essential that they immerse themselves in a deep study of the culture, ethics, and organization of Chinese society. They learned Chinese and read Confucius and other Chinese texts, with the intent of finding parallels between Christian theology and Chinese morality.

After studying the Annals, the Jesuits began to theorize that Chinese society could actually be dated back to 2697 BCE, or 600 years before the Flood according to calculations made from the Old Testament chronology (Jones 13). At the time in Europe, of course, Darwin and his ideas on evolution were still far over the horizon, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, people explained their origins in biblical terms. The Jesuits' careful study of Chinese sources, when it filtered back to Europe, led to some interesting questions. Some wondered if the Chinese were a pre-Adamic race. Others surmised that they were the lost tribe of Seth, and still others conjectured that the Chinese language might be the original language from which all others arose. As Jones explains, this even led some to question the accuracy of the Christian religious texts: “if Chinese civilization dated back to Noah, its ancient works might more accurately reflect the morality practiced by the chosen people before the Flood. Its sacred texts, moreover, might shed further light on the mystery of the creation” (Jones 14).

Although much of the Jesuit scholarship on China had been for the purpose of justifying the Jesuits' missionary strategy—the somewhat controversial idea that Christ and Confucius could coexist—Jones contends that:

Enlightenment philosophers and scientists discovered in these accounts precisely what the Jesuits denied. In other words, the Enlightenment thinkers of the early and mid-eighteenth century, found in China a model of a moral society governed by natural reason and freed from the superstitious fetters of religion that had imposed a yoke of custom on European institutions (Jones 20).

This added to the notion of China that Europeans had begun to piece together. It was both a vast, unified, prosperous empire with a history more ancient than the earliest Western accounts, as well as a place where morality and religion were separate.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Enlightenment thinkers took up the initial scholarship of the Jesuits. As had happened following the circulation of Marco Polo's *Travels*, there was a wave of literary and philosophical works written by Europeans who had never been to China. The writings of the Jesuits and other missionary groups were their primary source and many based their work on predecessors who had also never been to China. From this removed position, the

gaps in knowledge could be filled in by essentializing or imagining, and the Chinese philosophy and moral discourse could be twisted to suit their purposes. Fascinated by the possibilities of Confucian morality and the intricacies of Chinese philosophy, European thinkers borrowed from the Chinese, expanding their understanding of the world using the knowledge the Jesuits sent back, or searching within Chinese tradition for parallels of their own ideas (Spence 84-93).

As it had been in Marco Polo's day, China continued to be seen as a vast, unified country, administered by an efficient, far-reaching and merit-based bureaucracy, in contrast to a fragmentary Europe struggling to break out of Divine Right Monarchism.

While European scholars studied Chinese ideas, an aesthetic appreciation for all things Chinese or Chinese-looking was also gaining popularity. Called 'Chinoiserie', this fad was inspired by the Chinese porcelain, painting, tile and wallpaper that had become widely available in Europe. Architecture, interior design, art and furniture all began to reflect a Chinese influence. Pagodas sprang up in English gardens; furniture-makers decorated their pieces with Chinese landscape paintings; the wealthy papered or tiled entire rooms with Chinese motifs, and Chinese porcelain was so popular that craftsmen across Europe sought to imitate it, producing their own ceramics—and eventually porcelain when they learned to make it—with meticulously reproduced Chinese patterns.

At the height of its popularity, the Chinoiserie trend, particularly in the realm of visual arts, helped to construct an idea in the European mind about China and the East. As Impey contends, that idea was vague and driven more by aesthetics than it was by accuracy. Referring to a lavish metalwork diorama piece by Johann Melchior Dinglinger entitled *The Birthday of the Grand Mogul*, Impey explains that Chinoiserie-inspired art was often:

a glorious celebration of all that is fantastic, exotic and lavish of a partly imaginary East based on intermingled elements of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Near Eastern and European styles. It is at once a summing up of the vague knowledge of the East, and a prophecy of things to come (177).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, relations between China and Europe became more regular and China, previously imagined by Europeans as a mysterious, prosperous and unified land of heathens to be evangelized, from whence came silk and spices, porcelain and tea, was now seen as a potential colony. For nearly 250 years, the Jesuits and other missionary groups had been the primary source of information about China. Now, as the powers of Europe dreamed of empire, the colonial administrators, officials, ambassadors and naval officers who went east to push their countries' interests sent home a much different picture of China.



Hampered by the mercantilist European mentality of the time, many of these political visitors to China made themselves unwelcome and their writings are full of the frustration they felt with a China that refused to cooperate with their designs. One such man was British Commodore George Anson, who sailed into Canton yet refused to pay harbour dues, threatened local pilots and demanded meetings with viceroys to whom he was insignificant; Lord Macartney, who famously refused to kowtow to the emperor, yet demanded that China allow the British to trade without restrictions was another. These men, particularly Anson, sent home a picture of China as backward, deceitful, diplomatically unenlightened, and mired in a stagnant, patriarchal bureaucracy.

Anson—whose arrogance had evidently exacerbated his situation—wrote prolifically and with great disdain about Chinese society. He offered numerous examples of the deceitful character of the Chinese, unaware that some of this dishonesty was directly related to their personal dislike of him. His inability to understand the Chinese writing system led him to condemn the Chinese as stubborn. As Spence explains, according to Anson, “while all the rest of the world had been busy learning sensible alphabets, the Chinese had shown their typical stubbornness: ‘the Chinese alone, have hitherto neglected to avail themselves of that almost divine invention and have continued to adhere to the rude and inartificial method of representing words by arbitrary marks’” (55).

Macartney, though he appears much more open-minded in his writings (Spence 57), was known in Europe chiefly for his actions, and many saw his refusal to kowtow to the Qianlong emperor as a heroic act that had preserved the honour of Britain. Using the rhetoric that Anson had supplied them with, the thinkers and politicians of the time attributed the failure of the Macartney mission to the uncooperative character of the Chinese.

Thus, the reality of diplomatic relations altered Europeans’ perceptions of China. It also served to turn the previous centuries’ dialectic upside-down: where China had been glorified as a means of criticizing Europe, now China was disparaged, in order to elevate Europe.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, those who studied and wrote about China began adopting a more critical tone. Where previously writings had been overwhelmingly in praise of China, now the philosophers and authors of Europe were disapproving. It became fashionable to set up comparative discourses between China and Europe, and even Voltaire, who questioned much of Anson’s criticism, offered the following assessment of Chinese backwardness:

It is surprising that this people, so happy at invention, have never penetrated beyond the elements of geometry; that in music they are even ignorant of semitones; and that their astronomy, with all their other sciences, should be at once so ancient and imperfect. Nature seems to have bestowed on this species of men, so different from the Europeans, organs sufficient to discover all at once, what was necessary to their happiness, but incapable to proceed further: we, on the other hand, were tardy in our discoveries; but then we have speedily brought everything to perfection (qtd. in Spence 97).

However, this vision of China as a land resistant to Progress also helped to deepen the portrait of ‘exotic China’ as a place one could find lost values. In this light, China’s supposed backwardness appealed to those Europeans ambivalent to the inexorable March of Progress, and they embraced the idea of China as an unchanging traditional refuge. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, ‘exotic China’ grew from a series of vague ideas into a near-concrete land of the collective unconscious. As Spence explains, European writers were able to “draw out of this welter of overlapping themes a central core of mutually reinforcing images and perceptions that by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century had coalesced to form what we can call a ‘new exotic’” (145).

Clearly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was not the first, nor was he the last, to be fascinated by a faraway Orient. The European enthrallment with distant lands that would later become known as exoticism was already well-established in his time.

What is exoticism? The very word ‘exotic’ conjures up visions of distant, unknown lands: lush jungles, forbidding deserts, the scent of spices, and busy markets overflowing with mysterious and seductive wares. The word ‘exotic’ has as its root the Greek prefix ‘exo-’ which means ‘external’. In his notes for a grand, all-encompassing—but never finished—essay on exoticism, French author Victor Segalen has this to say about the word’s essential meaning: “Definition of the prefix *Exo* in the most general sense possible. Everything that lies ‘outside’ the sum total of our current, conscious, everyday events, everything that does not belong to our usual ‘Mental Tonality’” (Essay on Exoticism: an Aesthetics of Diversity 16). It could be argued that exoticism has always existed, for often even the most ancient literatures dealt with topics that were outside the sum total of current, everyday events of their time, and many authors wrote about the past in such a way.

However, Segalen’s all-encompassing vision of the exotic as anything marked by difference was the end product of an aesthetic that was already several centuries old. Although he tried, from his early-twentieth-century vantage point, to reduce the notion of exotic to a most basic experience of all that was different, the word ‘exotic’ and the practice of exoticism were far

more culturally-anchored and defined by clichés than he would have liked. By the mid-eighteenth century ‘exotic’ had come to mean that which was culturally and geographically outside of one’s experience, and that experience was exclusively Western: the European was the observer, and the worlds that he had ‘discovered’ became the observed. The observation did not need to be first-hand, and the European exoticist could easily bypass his lack of first-hand knowledge by simply using a handful of commonly accepted cultural signifiers and writing about the chosen exotic place based on the few very general pieces of information he happened to have read about it .

The importance of the exotic, therefore, lay in what it meant to the European author and his audience. Why did the European, convinced of his own superiority, seek inspiration in foreign lands and strange people that were different, when difference was, to him, a marker of inferiority? As Rousseau and Porter explain:

Whatever lies beyond the horizon of our mental maps of the familiar, conjuring up fascination and terror alike, acquires the attributes of difference, and thereby, of course, serves to reinforce the comforting perception of our own good order and sweet reasonableness. Containing an element of the forbidden, the exotic is that realm of the excluded which is not absolutely prohibited, but merely signposted by danger lights (4).

Exoticism in the eighteenth century, therefore, had been largely about defining the European notion of Self by way of portraying an Other who was markedly different. This difference depended on the exotic Other being unlike and often lesser than the European Self, thereby reinforcing the assumed superiority of European culture.

In the nineteenth century, however, exoticism had become more than a simple aesthetic practice; it was not merely about turning a fanciful gaze toward an elsewhere outside of the familiar, it also became a discourse of loss. As industrialization and urbanization increased, pulling people away from the land, many Europeans, particularly artists and writers, felt a mounting sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with their rapidly modernizing world. According to Bongie, many turned to exoticism because it:

Posited another space, the space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a “civilization” that, by virtue of its *modernity*, was perceived by many writers as being incompatible with certain essential values—or, indeed, the realm of value itself. What modernity is in the process of obliterating “here” might still prove a present possibility in this alternative geopolitical space (5).

Thus, exoticism was a discourse of the loss of human values to Progress, one that depended for its existence on a world organized in terms of opposites: observer and observed,

East and West, modern and traditional—the European sought, in the realm of the opposite, value that progress and modernity had erased.

However, this new vision of exoticism as a discourse of loss did not erase earlier ideas; the concepts of superior European Self and inferior exotic Other were simply incorporated into this nineteenth-century vision of exoticism. While the exotic Other was still seen as lesser or inferior, the European and Euro-American were beginning to question the elements upon which the assumed superiority of their society depended: modernity, progress and industrialization brought prosperity and technological advancement, but they also brought alienation, disempowerment and poverty.

These differing visions of exoticism highlight the importance of the practice as a culturally-anchored phenomenon. Exotic literature was not the classic Orientalist literature as conceived by Edward Said, although it shared many characteristics with it. The purpose of Orientalist scholarship, according to Said, was to contain and subjugate ‘the Orient’. In this view, scholarship was either directly related to colonial administration policy, or else it was a “project” by which one aimed to know, uncover and classify the Other, thereby achieving control over a subject people and justifying imperialism. Exoticist literature did not exist solely as an ideological means to control the Other; however, many of the assumptions and discursive practices that Said describes can also be found in exotic literature. And although it was generally not intended as a political tool, exotic literature also did not exist as a purely culturally- and politically-neutral aesthetic practice. Exoticism was dependent on the ideology out of which it grew—a matter-of-course imperialism responsible for the notion of inferior and superior cultures and races that was the framework for early exoticism. As Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism*, the ideology of imperialism and the global power structures that went with it were deeply ingrained and taken for granted and thus coloured—and still colour—all cultural production. Even literature that explored the ambivalence many intellectuals felt towards European domination and exploitation could not see beyond the framework of a world whose very economic and cultural structure depended on that domination (Said 20). Therefore, while exoticist writing was an aesthetic practice not intended as an adjunct to colonial administration, it was nonetheless a product of the imperial society of which its writers were a part.

Just as exoticism was tied in this way to the imperialist ethic, as a discourse of loss it was also inextricably linked to a certain anxiety about modernity. The modern world, in the exoticist

world-view, was a homogenizing juggernaut that would eventually reduce “both the earth and those who inhabit it to a single common denominator” (Bongie 149). As Bongie explains, exoticist writing was a means of escaping an oppressive modernity. It was an expression of a longing for the lost value of a simpler, less modern world. Within the nineteenth-century exoticist text, this surfaced as an idealizing of the natural world and a negating of everything modern by portraying a more primitive existence and a simpler, more human exotic Other. By the early twentieth century, however, modernity’s advance was accepted as inevitable. While the exoticist had grown to accept modernity within his own world, he still had difficulty accepting it within the exotic world. The distant, faraway place to which he could escape must remain frozen in time. A modernizing Orient was either frightening or sad—or both. At the same time, the twentieth century exoticist who truly loved the foreign country and people that inspired him could not help but wish some of the technological advances of modernity on their exotic world—but not all. This tension between an inexorable, advancing modernity and a disappearing exotic Other world was characteristic of early twentieth-century exotic writing.

In this thesis project, I propose to examine three specific examples of Western literature about China from the early twentieth century. This literature is an exceptional blend of exoticism and its related ideologies, imperialism and modernity. The tensions between these three elements play out in different ways in each chapter of this thesis, and yet all three are examples of exotic writing about China at a time when exoticism was a lost cause, or as Bongie describes it, “an idea with no future” (15). In these examples, imperialism still coloured perceptions of a racially distinct other, and modernity’s inevitability made imagining the exotic a depressing, frightening or naively hopeful exercise. In all three examples, this results in an exoticism that seeks to extend the boundaries of what had become a shrinking frontier. While a few of the authors succeed in balancing the tensions between exoticism, imperialism and modernity, in general most do not, and the texts remain deeply conflicted.

The first chapter, “Revenge of the Yellow Doctor”, focusses on Yellow Peril literature, a genre built on the fear of an Asian invasion and takeover of the Western world, and featuring unforgettable characters such as the fantastically evil Fu Manchu. This type of literature is underpinned by a British style of imperialism where empire was held through organized control, administration and settlement of colonies. It offers a vision of modernity through its antagonists: Fu Manchu and other Yellow Peril literature villains embody the evil side of modernity, by

presenting a superhuman character who has used science and modern knowledge to become the quintessence of evil. In Yellow Peril literature, the exotic appears as that which conjured up “fascination and terror alike” (Rousseau and Porter 4), but with a focus on terror. The tension between the exotic and the modern play out as the two worlds begin to mesh and can no longer remain separate.

The second chapter, “The Poet who would be Emperor”, discusses the writings of the French naval doctor and exoticist poet Victor Segalen, who proposed a new definition of exoticism as a purely aesthetic practice. He saw exoticism as the experience of the shock of difference when finding oneself in unfamiliar surroundings and was determined to strip exoticist writing of its many clichés. Fascinated by China, he wrote several volumes of esoteric poetry, a novel and a sizeable selection of semi-novelistic prose works, all inspired by his vision of exotic China. However, although Segalen saw his work as a purely artistic endeavour, his relationship to China was nonetheless framed by the French imperialist project that brought him there. Unlike British imperialism, the French imperial project was characterized by a belief in the civilizing mission above all else, and encouragement of assimilation. While the British story of empire was one of unruly savages in need of British governance, the French story told of a relationship between colonizer and colonized built on love: the colonized were encouraged to love their new ‘patrie’, while the colonial administrators attempted to win over their subjects by professing their humanitarian love for them. In Segalen’s vision, there was no place for modernity; his exoticism was backward-looking and timeless, and modernity was therefore ignored, or completely written out. Because of this refusal to accept that the exotic Other might also want to embrace progress and modernity, Segalen’s exoticist doctrine is unable to make sense of the modern-day political realities that were a part of the exotic world: colonialism, imperialism, revolution, war and cultural hybridization, and instead presents a backward-looking, loving portrait of a timeless—but not real—China.

The third chapter, “Yearning for the Good Earth”, proposes an examination of Pearl S. Buck from an exoticist angle. Though Buck is rarely seen as an exotic writer, *The Good Earth* and her other novels provide readers with an imagined world outside the confines of their own, modern existence. Unlike Sax Rohmer and Victor Segalen, Pearl Buck did not carry the same unabashed imperialist legacy. For an American in the 1930s, imperialism was believed to be an evil perpetrated by other countries. In truth, however, America simply had its own brand of

imperialism, characterized by a self-righteous denial of any involvement in empire, all the while offering “guidance” (heavy-handed or otherwise) to nations who were economically or politically valuable as assets. Although Americans did not think of this type of political maneuvering as imperialism, it operated in much the same way, as American involvement in Central America showed. However, this type of covert imperialism did not necessarily rely as heavily on assumptions of racial inferiority and superiority, as it was much more nation-focussed. Consequently, those, such as Pearl Buck, who embraced the idea of an America that must, because of its “unique spirit” push other countries toward American-style democracy, could write about an exotic Other with a much lesser emphasis on an implied racial hierarchy. Unlike earlier exotic writing, Pearl Buck did not wholeheartedly reject all of modernity. While Segalen and Sax Rohmer both express the traditional exotic tension between the rapidly modernizing Self and the traditional, primitive Other, Buck is able to both idealize the pre-modern simplicity of her Chinese characters while accepting that certain elements of the modern world could benefit them. Instead of wholly rejecting modernity, Pearl Buck’s exoticism, focussed on creating a place where the values of the American mythology of hard work and success had not been distorted by modernity, but where that which could make life better for the common man or woman—such as modern medicine or women’s rights—was welcome. In Buck’s China, disillusioned Depression-era readers found a place where the simple life was still valued and hard work would still invariably equal success.

Sax Rohmer, Victor Segalen and Pearl S. Buck each present a very different vision of exoticism, one that is specifically relevant to their readers and era. Each blends the various ideological strands of modernity, imperialism and the exotic in a unique way, and thereby presents an exotic Other that belonged to their own respective British, French or American imagination. Through these writings, early twentieth-century western readers were presented with a variety of visions of an exotic China about which they had little or no first-hand experience. Their own knowledge and feelings toward China were shaped by the nature of the China offered them by Sax Rohmer, Victor Segalen or Pearl S. Buck. In this thesis, by using the common theme of exoticism, I examine the ways these authors created a unique reality of China for their readers. By also scrutinizing the complicated relationship between the texts and their imperialist scaffolding as well as the authors’ reluctance to accept modernity for China, it becomes apparent that this literature, while greatly increasing the scope of readers’ knowledge

and understanding, also served to perpetuate cultural and racial assumptions held by the West about the places—beginning to be recognized as separate—that had once comprised the imagined, all-encompassing Orient.



# Chapter One: The Revenge of the Yellow Horde

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## *Yellow Peril, White Fear and the Twilight of Empire*

### **Introduction**

In 1898, British author M.P. Shiel imagined a full-scale invasion of Europe by the Chinese and Japanese. In his novel *The Yellow Danger*, China provokes war in Europe by strategically offering territorial concessions to the European powers, carefully chosen to encourage animosity amongst them. Naturally, war breaks out in Europe, leaving the continent militarily crippled and destroying alliances between white nations. Thus enfeebled, the civilizations of Europe are powerless to resist the ‘yellow wave’ that rushes out of China, first through Russia then into Germany and France. The Chinese armies move across the countryside, massacring and resettling, eventually setting up their new capital in Paris. This ‘yellow invasion’ is led by a certain Yen How: a western-trained, highly intelligent Chinese statesman and brilliant military tactician who transforms China’s millions of farmers and city-dwellers into one massive super-army. His genius as a tactician is surpassed only by his expertise as a torturer. Continental Europe succumbs to the yellow wave, but Britain manages to resist and ultimately reclaim Europe thanks to a young officer named John Hardy. Hardy’s genius as a naval tactician is as deadly as Yen How’s ability to engineer a full-scale invasion and massacre. But for the pluck and courage of the British Navy, Europe and the white race would have all but perished and Hardy, who drives the invaders back to China after decimating them with disease, is the hero of the new century.

In 1914, Jack London imagined a similar scenario unfolding in the United States: writing from the perspective of 70 years into the future, London recounts how the Chinese population, whose hostilities began with unstoppable immigration, grows so numerous that all the armies of the world put together cannot stop the flood of resettlement and takeover—until brilliant American scientists conceive of a biological warfare attack so thorough it leaves all of China an empty wasteland.

The stage set by these two visions of the Apocalypse, readers, both British and American, thrilled to tales of evil Chinese masterminds: crime-bosses of unfathomable cruelty who doubled as the architects of sinister international plots to overthrow the white race. These superhuman

villains were invariably masters of a dark and unknowable underworld populated by character-types drawn, in a perfect example of Saidian Orientalism, from a pan-Asian world of oriental fantasy. Fu Manchu was the paragon of this ominous devil who embodied everything Europe and America feared about the ‘Yellow Peril’. Based in part on Shiel’s earlier and equally evil Yen How, Sax Rohmer’s anti-hero launched plot after plot against white imperialism, through literary and cinematic adventures spanning nearly five decades, and inspiring spin-offs from comic book crime-bosses to James Bond villains and shaping, whether consciously or unconsciously, an image of China in the western imagination.

These ‘Yellow Peril’ novels were, of course, products of their time. In the twilight of a waning imperialism, Britain still clung steadfastly to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century imperial world order. The Empire grew in size but became increasingly intractable. Newly decolonized states were like children, sent out on their own for the first time under the watchful eye of proud, nervous parents—parents who were starting to realize that their progeny was not grateful to them for having been ‘civilized’. China, they had discovered with shock and resentment, resisted efforts toward colonization, did not want to be civilized and was so uninterested in British commerce that it had to be forced upon the recalcitrant nation. At the same time, the first Sino-Japanese War not only established Japan as a powerful military force, poised—as many saw it—to become an imperial power itself, but also reshuffled previous European alliances, planting the seeds of military insecurity.

In the realm of ideas, Science had crept into everyday knowledge; the ideas of Darwin and Malthus were at the fingertips of all educated men, while Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch’s validation of germ theory was radically changing both hygiene practice and ways of thinking, including new ways of understanding physical contact between human beings.

From this particular mix of current events, foreign policy, immigration policy, science and the fashionable philosophies of the day was born the ‘Yellow Peril’ literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But these tales of racial apocalypse had another dimension: more than just products of a sociopolitical and philosophical context, they were built on a foundation of collective fear.

These novels, born of the cultural mythology of racial hierarchy that was taken for granted in Europe and America, provide a rich showcase of European and Euro-American fears and insecurities about race, resources and the future. Some of these fears were accepted,

conventional anxieties of the metropolitan nation and its citizens; others were less conscious, the product of a nascent sense of guilt that grew as the age of imperialism began to decline. In this essay, I propose to analyze a selection of ‘Yellow Peril’ works through the lens of the specific fears and insecurities that are consciously and unconsciously woven into them, incorporating the historical and philosophical climate that engendered each anxiety.

The first section of this chapter explores the fears and anxieties that arose from the decline of imperialism. Beyond questions of economics, power and national pride, there were other unspoken worries: with the push for freedom and decolonization, would the colonies be satisfied with independence? What if Europe were made to answer for the domination and control of peoples that, one could now clearly see, had not wanted to be dominated?

The second section discusses the Malthusian-inspired fears of scarcity that worried early 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers: would the earth be able to produce enough food and fuel to support its growing population, and if not, how to ensure that the inevitable population checks of famine and disease fell upon someone else?

The third section examines the anxieties surrounding the loss of the exotic Orient that had lived for over a century in European imagination. With new challenges to colonization, the exotic world was no longer a lush, mysterious land of noble, subjugated savages—suddenly ‘real’ Asia was destroying the imagined Orient, taking away not only a rich fantasy-world, but also the imagined Other against which European society had defined itself.

For the most part, these fears do not appear overtly. It is only through a deconstructive reading of the texts that some of the deepest insecurities can be glimpsed. However, it is my contention that the insecurities that underpin these tales of evil, invasion, massacre and corruption are far more important than the historical context that engendered them. Because as the world moves on and historical situations change, the prejudices and stereotypes invariably fade and fall away. But the fears often remain, below our consciousness, waiting to be reignited by a new political crisis.

### **Eye for an Eye: Imperial Atrocities and Retribution**

As the sun went down on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain commanded the largest empire the world had ever known, counting, by the time it reached its greatest scope in 1922, nearly 500 million subjects and covering a quarter of the earth’s surface. The small north Atlantic island had India, Burma, Egypt, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya, South Africa, Jamaica, Bermuda and

many others under direct colonial control. The British, still proud to be the world's foremost global power, proudly proclaimed that the sun never set on their empire.

France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands jealously guarded their own colonies against the British juggernaut and against one another. Even the United States, a country that preached self-determination, embarked on her own imperial venture with the annexation of the Philippines.

Empire was the way of the world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Power belonged to those who had colonies; those who did not were insignificant, while the colonized were believed to be inferior, unable to govern themselves and in need of being 'civilized'.

The world order of Empire pervaded all aspects of western society. It was so bound up in art and literature that one can find a clear foundation of imperialist thought in the most seemingly unpolitical novels, as Said demonstrates in his analysis of *Great Expectations* and *Mansfield Park* (89)

At the same time, in this climate of colonial scramble and amidst calls to "take up the white man's burden" of enlightening the backward nations of the world, there were undercurrents of doubt. Empire required heavy-handed control, which in turn required taxation and large military and paramilitary forces permanently under arms abroad. In Britain, the taxes and the human cost of colonial wars tended to fall on those who derived little economic benefit from the increasingly costly practice of colonial administration. Others worried that an overcommitted military would weaken Britain. The long, bitter and costly Boer War seemed to justify these objections to British imperial policy, fostering a growing sentiment of anti-imperialism.

In the 1890s, British Consul Roger Casement, American Historian George Washington Williams, and British journalist Edmund Morel brought the atrocities of the Congo Free State's rubber trade to light, publishing numerous articles and pamphlets and inspiring Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. While the parallels between Leopold II's murderous regime and their own country's imperial enterprise may have only been faintly glimpsed by much of the British readership, to Morel these links were obvious. According to Zins,

He not only saw the individual wrongs inflicted by Europeans upon African people, but also grasped the whole nature of European expansion and exploitation. He condemned the system of forced labour and forced production, and identified two essential characteristics: denial to the natives of any rights to their land, and denial to the natives of any income from commercial

products produced on their land. Morel wrote that the colonial exploitation was an old story of evil, greed and lust perpetrated upon a weaker people. (62)

In the United States, Americans were shocked by their country's underhanded takeover of the Philippines. Mark Twain became one of the most vituperous critics of US imperialism. Not only did he condemn the American presence in the Philippines, but he also offered an unwavering critique of imperialism in general. On returning home from a ten-year stint abroad, he had this to say about US involvement in China: "We have no more business in China than in any other country that is not ours" (4) On the topic of the Philippines, he attacked the government rhetoric of liberation and exposed it for the subjugation that it was:

I have read the treaty of Paris, and I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. We have also pledged the power of this country to maintain and protect the abominable system established in the Philippines by the Friars. It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to make those people free, and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talon on any other land. (5)

Although Mark Twain was unequivocally opposed to imperialism—as well as racial exploitation and discrimination against ethnic minorities at home—many other late 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors presented much more conflicted visions of the practice of Empire. In his analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Edward Said points out how the novel presents imperialism as a world order to which there is no alternative, and yet at the same time, shows the practice for what it is: an enterprise of greed and waste, full of horrors. As Said explains

Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that "natives" could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them. (30)

Robert Louis Stevenson also turned to anti-imperialism during his years in Samoa. Like Conrad, his anti-imperialism was conflicted and self-aggrandizing. He supported local rebellions while at the same time acknowledging that Samoan independence was a lost cause. As Kucich points out, "Stevenson's anti-imperial megalomania, I would argue, is inextricably related to his deeply felt affinity for martyrdom—both his own and that of the Samoans with whom he identified" (Kucich). Despite these shortcomings, Stevenson presented Samoan society—in opposition to the generally-held metropolitan assumptions about native social structure—as one fit for self-government and not requiring imperial intervention.

Popular sentiment about Empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was, I would like to suggest, as conflicted as Conrad and Stevenson: although many accepted imperialism as a matter of course, their convictions were not so solid that they could wholly accept all past and current atrocities in the name of Empire and civilization.

With the advent of oceanic telegraph cables, news from the colonies arrived instantaneously. Acts of the colonial regimes were no longer incidents that took place in distant lands away from public scrutiny. The atrocities that had previously remained outside of public awareness now began to enter the European consciousness. This dim awareness of injustices perpetrated abroad was then by necessity countered with Kipling-style “jingoistic celebration” (Zins 63) of the civilizing mission of the white race.

The Boxer Uprising added to these mixed feelings. The systematic, deliberate targeting of foreigners by what was perceived as a fanatical yet condoned sect shocked those who had taken their presence in China for granted. Where they had previously felt secure behind the military superiority of their own country, they now felt vulnerable. The incident also drove home the point that the imperial enterprise could only be accomplished by force: in order to maintain the Euro-American presence in the treaty ports, missions and on the waterways, a large multinational military force was required. At the same time, it also awakened doubts about the self-appointed civilizing mission of the white race. Roger Coltman Jr., a surgeon for the Chinese Imperial Railways during the Boxer Uprising who lived in China for several decades, expresses in his memoir not only incredulity at the Boxers’ aggression to foreigners, but also a certain empathy for their spiritual motivations:

While I am a Christian myself, and would gladly see China a Christian nation, I cannot help seeing that the policy which has been pursued in forcing Christianity upon the Chinese, in the aggressive manner we have, practically at the point of the sword, has not been a success, and has given to such men as Tung Fu Hsiang a powerful argument with which to persuade his ignorant followers to exterminate alike the foreigner and his converts. (38)

In short, for the majority of Europeans—and Americans—whose political views fell just slightly outside of staunch all-out imperialism, convictions wavered between nationalistic pride for the perceived altruism and philanthropy of the colonial project, and discomfort at the reality of colonialism’s unfolding. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, these doubts about the righteousness of empire translated into the fears that drove the simplistic yet fantastical ‘us’ versus ‘them’ plots that are a key feature of Yellow Peril fiction.

The invasions and massacres of M.P. Shiel's Yen How, the conspiracies of Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu and Jack London's faceless Chinese hordes could only have issued from this sense of imperial disquiet, as they are wholly retributive in nature. If the goal of these works was to portray overt late-colonial anxieties, their anti-heroes would have stopped at independence and decolonization. Instead, Shiel and Rohmer create elaborate world takeover scenarios that require politically impractical full-scale alliances between all nations that the west considered 'oriental' and whose result can only be the complete elimination of the white race. In describing British anxiety over the upcoming invasion, Shiel recounts,

It was felt, of course, that the yellow conquest could not be an ordinary conquest, if it happened at all. There was no question of conqueror and conquered living together afterwards and fraternising, like Norman and Saxon. The yellow conquest meant, naturally, that wherever it passed the very memory of the white races it encountered would disappear forever (The Yellow Danger).

The massacres are so complete and thorough that "with the silence and the thoroughness of the Angel of the Passover they smite, they slay" (Shiel); the cruelty of the entire race so extreme that Fu Manchu's "very genius was inspired by the cool, calculated cruelty of his race, of that race which to this day dispose of hundreds, nay! thousands of its unwanted girl-children by the simple measure of throwing them down a well specially dedicated to the purpose" (Rohmer, The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu). When the Chinese take over Paris and set up "the capital of the new Chinese world" there, Shiel mentions "the bodiless heads and arms with which the screaming Chinese played ball."

The Chinese are depicted as being sublimely, inhumanly cruel, because this was the retribution that the west secretly feared for the atrocities of colonialism. Why write of world takeover when the reality was merely greater autonomy with probable continued economic subjugation of the colonies? Why create an invasion scenario that so closely mirrors European colonialism and then thoroughly imbue it with evil?

In the latter days of Empire, this anxiety of retribution simmered below the facade of clean, British efficiency. As Hashimoto explains, this fear can be seen in the way Fu Manchu is portrayed as a near superhuman genius:

As Bhabha said, the 'almost the same *but not quite*' aspect of the colonized could be a 'menace' due to its destabilization of the hierarchy. Fu Manchu was no longer a 'Nodding Mandarin' speaking comical Pidgin-English: 'His English was perfect, though at times his words were oddly chosen; his delivery alternately was guttural and sibilant'. This uncanny fluency reflected anxiety of a Frankenstein-like monster springing forth from colonization. (xx).

Fu Manchu's cruelty underlines the threat he poses: he kills Nayland Smith's Scotland Yard men with deadly spores of giant fungi; he subjects his victims to an agonizing death by giant ravenous rats. Yen How's cruelty is equally gruesome, but more calculated. When he captures John Hardy in Peking, Yen How begins by simply studying him, so that "he knew the precise truth about Hardy's vitality, its quantity, its intensity, its whole diathesis; he knew just how much mental and and physical torture the lad could bear, and for how long, without an actual cessation of life". The torture that follows, naturally, is expertly orchestrated to provoke as much mental and physical anguish as possible while never killing John Hardy. When Yen How raises his army—which consists of the entire population of China, armed with "a club, or a dart, or a match-lock, or a poker—anything which would give him the idea that he had to fight"—he ensures that there are "no field-hospitals, or hospital orderlies, no ambulances, no medical provision. Yen How could afford men" (Shiel).

Seshagiri suggests that the cruelty of these Yellow Peril anti-heroes is a result of modernity: "Petrie's realization that 'something inhuman' motivates his enemy demonstrates that knowledge deployed for antihumanistic purposes is the by-product of a national quest for enlightenment and progress" (186). However, when we consider that the quest for enlightenment and progress is also bound up in the project of colonization, particularly when knowledge is used to subjugate a people, it no longer becomes simply a question of antihumanistic purposes, as Seshagiri suggests, but one of retribution: the colonized, having gained the knowledge that subjugated them, could now use that knowledge against their oppressors.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Empire stood on shaky ground. Colonial subjects were not docile and easily controlled; in order to maintain their less than secure presence in colonies, metropolitan nations were required to mix force with systemic institutional pressure. Rebellions and uprisings were becoming more and more frequent and the dissatisfaction of the native peoples could no longer be ignored. This insecurity translated into literary depictions of Eastern uprisings that turned into racial invasions, massacres and takeovers of entire countries. It was, after all, exactly what the Empire had done.

### **Flights of Locusts: Population, Scarcity, Human Breeding and Disease**

*That population cannot increase without the means of subsistence is a proposition so evident that it needs no illustration. That population does invariably increase where there are the means of subsistence, the history of every people that have ever existed will abundantly prove. And that the superior power of population cannot be checked without*



*producing misery or vice, the ample portion of these too bitter ingredients in the cup of human life and the continuance of the physical causes that seem to have produced them bear too convincing a testimony.*

*Thomas Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population, 1798*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, science was making astounding progress: from the development of vaccines to the discovery of electricity and the design of the first internal combustion engines, science and its technology were changing the very fabric of daily life.

It was also changing the way people thought about themselves and their place in the world. Moving away from the shackles of religious doctrine, thinkers tried to apply scientific methods of inquiry to the larger questions of humanity and society; thus was born what became known as the social sciences. However, despite a determination to think scientifically, the social sciences lacked the objectivity of proof-based science. Because of this, 19<sup>th</sup> century social science spoke with the authority of science yet carried with it the prejudices of its thinkers.

This unique blend of science and prejudice only served to fuel European and Euro-American fears about people and things they considered ‘other’. Questions of race, which previously had often been examined from a biblical perspective, now received a “scientific” treatment.

This section examines Fu Manchu and other Yellow Peril works through the lens of science. Although much of what was in vogue has now been overturned as unscientific and largely based on prejudice, at the time the so-called ‘scientific’ thought that allowed white Europeans and Euro-Americans to imagine a world order based on racial hierarchy was accorded widespread legitimacy. Yellow Peril literature reflects the deep anxieties about race and world population that preoccupied the white western world.

Two branches of ‘scientific’ thought greatly influenced early 20<sup>th</sup> century racial thinking, while a third—the only one still considered legitimate science today—influenced the way people viewed large groups of moving populations. In 1798, Thomas Malthus published his *Essay on the Principle of Population*; by 1900 his simple theory that populations would naturally increase exponentially, outstripping food production and therefore incurring the inevitable population checks of war, disease, and famine was considered common knowledge. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Malthus’ theories of population were combined with Darwin’s concept of survival of the fittest to create the disturbing ‘science’ of eugenics. At the same time, the introduction of germ theory allowed people to imagine infectious disease in the same way Malthus had imagined population:

sickness was merely a population of germs that reproduced exponentially under ideal conditions, and migrated along with populations of people.

Although Malthus rarely refers to race in his essay, he nonetheless presents a vision of a world divided into either exploding populations or responsible, self-limiting populations—a divide which easily lent itself to a racial interpretation. In what he refers to as tribal populations, groups would move from place to place in search of more desirable lands, invading and eliminating those who were already there. As he notes, “the prodigious waste of human life occasioned by this perpetual struggle for room and food was more than supplied by the mighty power of population.” This state of constant war and repopulation continued “till at length the whole territory, from the confines of China to the shores of the Baltic, was peopled by a various race of Barbarians, brave, robust, and enterprising, inured to hardship, and delighting in war.” Although it had always been assumed that the Attilas and Genghis Khans fought for glory and power, in fact, Malthus informs his readers, “the true cause that set in motion the great tide of northern emigration, and that continued to propel it till it rolled at different periods against China, Persia, Italy, and even Egypt, was a scarcity of food, a population extended beyond the means of supporting it.” (Malthus)

By contrast, completely ignoring the food and resource scarcity that would propel Europeans out to the far horizons in search of new land, he claims that the countries of Europe were naturally self-limiting because “a foresight of the difficulties attending the rearing of a family acts as a preventive check, and the actual distresses of some of the lower classes, by which they are disabled from giving the proper food and attention to their children, act as a positive check to the natural increase of population.” (Malthus) In other words, the hordes who allowed their populations to extend irresponsibly would spill out over their borders, causing war and the “prodigious waste of human life” that accompanied it. According to Connelly, Malthus’ assumptions led to

the development of a particular discursive tradition which represented certain European peoples as sharing a level of civilization that depended on balancing reproduction with available resources. By regulating their fertility, they prevented the degeneration caused by ‘overpopulation’. Yet survival depended on either maintaining spatial and social distance from those able to subsist on less and reproduce more, or creating new norms and institutions to regulate reproduction worldwide (300).

The world, therefore, in addition to being divided up in the European mind into East and West, white and non-white, was also seen as split into exploding populations and self-regulating populations.

This Malthus-inspired world-view naturally led to fear among those who considered themselves part of a self-limiting population. How to limit the hordes from invading? If population is doomed to war, famine and pestilence, how to ensure that those population checks fell on someone else, somewhere else? These anxieties were the basis of much of the Yellow Peril literature—nearly every work obsesses over the sheer size of the Chinese population.

In Yellow Peril literature, the Europeans and Euro-Americans, portrayed as self-limiting, are under constant threat from the exploding Chinese masses. Population size suddenly becomes a military asset. In Jack London's *The Unparalleled Invasion*, China's "danger lay in the fecundity of her loins." The act of aggression that unites all the white nations against this reproductive behemoth is the fact that "now she was spilling over the boundaries of her Empire—that was all, just spilling over into the adjacent territories with all the certainty and terrifying slow momentum of a glacier".

The idea of an unstoppable wave of human foreignness was more frightening than even the largest arsenal of sophisticated weaponry. Relates London,

There was no way to dam up the over-spilling monstrous flood of life. War was futile. China laughed at a blockade of her coasts. She welcomed invasion. In her capacious maw was room for all the hosts of earth that could be hurled at her. And in the meantime her flood of yellow life poured out and on over Asia.

In Shiel's 1898 *The Yellow Danger*, China's population becomes Yen How's main strategic asset. Instead of raising a modern, well-equipped army, Yen How simply turns the entire country into a "flight of locusts", conscripting all 400 million Chinese:

From horizon to horizon, each member was armed with some implement, not so much for the purpose of killing, as for the purpose of protracting his own death, while the rest of the host pressed forward, blighting as they went. His duty was hardly to fight, but to occupy time in dying. For this service, none were too old, few too young—and women were as good as men.

Naturally, Yen How's army suffers massive casualties, but the Chinese keep coming: "each fighting European destroyed, one way or another, thirty yellow men. But could the arm of each, dead-weary of slaughter, have destroyed three hundred, or three thousand, still the effort would have been wasted. Over the carcasses of a thousand dead straggled a million living".

Shiel assumes that the Chinese would happily resort to sacrificing their children and their elderly to the cause of the great "flight of locusts" because, according to Malthus and his 19<sup>th</sup>

century contemporaries, members of those populations who self-limited did so because they cared about their offspring and chose celibacy rather than suffer “the heart-rending sensation of seeing his children starve” (Malthus). Shiel naturally assumes that conversely, if the self-limiting peoples of the world did so because they cared for their children, then those who allowed their populations to explode must necessarily hold little value in human life.

According to Malthus, populations whose growth had outstripped food supply would find “premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race”. Overextended populations would spread out into new territories, fighting one another, only to inevitably be depopulated by “sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence and plague” and, should their success “still be incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world”. Naturally, this scenario is a terrifying one for all involved, be they invaded or invader. In the Yellow Peril literature, however, the threatened white race uses biological warfare to ensure that only the Chinese suffer artificially-induced Malthusian consequences of overpopulation.

Both *The Yellow Danger* and *The Unparalleled Invasion* have strikingly similar Malthusian endings: in *The Yellow Danger*, after fighting off the Chinese invasion of England, John Hardy injects a shipload of Chinese with cholera and then returns them to various ports in Europe. The infected Chinese make their way to their capital of Paris for the celebration of the birth of the new republic, and the cholera spreads through the gathered masses and eventually, from the single shipload of vectors, succeeds in decimating the entire conquering ‘horde’. Weakened, the Chinese return to China, their population reduced to a level where the native soil will again provide enough food.

The Chinese aggressors in Jack London’s tale are decimated in a very similar way, although in this case the race as a whole is almost completely wiped out. A colossal military force masses at China’s borders, but instead of invading, the forces of this white alliance merely send up tiny airships and drop glass tubes containing smallpox, yellow fever and plague onto Peking and across the countryside. The resulting death is so thorough that “had the reader been in Peking six weeks later, he would have looked in vain for the eleven million inhabitants. Some few of them he would have found, a few hundred thousand perhaps, their carcasses festering in the houses and in the deserted streets, and piled high on the abandoned death-wagons” (London).

In both Shiel and London's depictions, the white heroes save the day by submitting the Chinese to man-made Malthusian population checks. While London's apocalyptic vision has China completely depopulated, Shiel—more consistent with Malthusian theory—has the Chinese population simply return to a level of sustainability within its own borders. As Shiel muses, “after all, John Hardy's idea of the extinction of the yellow man never came to pass. Hardy was wise, but Nature is wiser. The yellow man is in the scheme”, adding to this magnanimous concession a quote from Longfellow's poem “The Golden Legend”: “and since God suffers him to be, he too is God's minister, and labors for some good”. Shiel's readers, of course, would have known that Longfellow was referring to Lucifer.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European thinkers had combined Malthus' basic premise about population with ideas about heredity to create the disturbing branch of science known as eugenics. Eugenics posited that the human race could be selectively bred, by encouraging those with ‘favourable characteristics’ to reproduce and by discouraging those with ‘unfavourable characteristics’ from reproducing. Methods of discouragement included outright genocide, mandatory or encouraged voluntary sterilization, and a refusal to provide health care and famine relief so as to allow Malthusian population checks to reduce the number of ‘undesirables’.

Support for eugenics fell sharply after the World War II Nazi genocide revealed the science's gruesome side, but at the time of the Yellow Peril literature, eugenics was at its height. Although later post-war retellings insisted that British and American eugenics movements had always been class-based, focussed largely on eliminating the ‘feeble-minded’ and ‘undeserving poor’ from the gene pool, they were nonetheless underpinned by the idea of a racial hierarchy. As Stone explains, in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century British eugenics, race and class were often conflated:

The centrality of race is shown in the way which (mainly Jewish) immigrants were discussed, and in the assumptions appealed to, common since the early nineteenth century, of a racial hierarchy which saw the white European at the top and the black African at the bottom. This assumption, which encompassed fears of miscegenation and hybridity, encouraging prurient interest in the sexualities of ‘inferior races’, was one which would shape eugenic concepts and methods of enquiry for many years, even after the development of genetic science ought to have shown such racial schemas to be no more than creations of fantasy. (398)

The idea of hierarchy that underpinned all racial eugenics is present throughout Yellow Peril literature. Most often, it is as an unstated assumption that would have been taken for granted at the time. However, in *The Yellow Danger*, Shiel has Yen How specifically acknowledge it:

‘Look forward five hundred, a thousand years, Marquis, and what do you see?’ answered Yen How. ‘Is it not this?—the white man and the yellow man in their death-grip, contending for the earth. The white and the yellow—there are no others. The black is the slave of both; the brown does not count’.

Yen How, in explaining why it is necessary to divide China into European-controlled spheres of influence in order to provoke war in Europe, once again uses the racial hierarchy motif, insisting that without first crippling the Europeans, the Chinese could never emerge victorious because of the superior powers of the white race:

‘By that time the white man will have something like a magician’s power over all nature. He will say to the mountains and the seas: “Be removed!”—and at his mere whisper they will obey him. We yellow men, too, will have advanced, but they will have vastly outstripped us. We cannot follow them, I tell you. The day will come when our mere numbers will no longer be of any importance in overthrowing them’.

Although Malthus did not believe in the perfectibility of the human race, eugenicists believed that through selective breeding, favourable qualities could be isolated and enhanced, creating an ever more advanced human being. At the time, intelligence and aptitudes were both thought to be hereditary, and eugenicists imagined that their science would ultimately lead to a highly intelligent, exceedingly adept and strikingly competent race of human beings. Of course, they assumed that this race would be white.

What if, however, one of the other races were to create a similar superhuman specimen? The horror this possibility inspired can be seen in the figures of Fu Manchu and Yen How, who are Chinese versions of the eugenic superhuman.

Fu Manchu is described as “the most stupendous genius that the modern Orient has produced”. He speaks perfect English, has at his command the secrets of biology, chemistry and Chinese medicine and the charisma to lead an assortment of mercenaries of every imaginable ‘oriental’ nationality. Fu Manchu “is no ordinary criminal. He is the greatest genius which the powers of evil have put on earth for centuries” (Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*).

Yen How is equally superhuman. He has easily mastered Confucian knowledge—coming first in the imperial examinations—as well as western science, having “spent the greater part of his life in acquiring western scientific views and methods in Heidelberg, Paris and Edinburgh”. But Yen How’s brilliance is not simply command of knowledge, but vision and leadership: “besides Knowledge and Race, Yen How had something more: he had Genius—the large Eye—the summoning Voice—the enchanter’s Wand. The vastness of his outlook—the world-dimensions of his schemes—were simply fascinating”.

By portraying Yen How and Fu Manchu as superhuman, racial and evil, Shiel and Rohmer identify some of the crucial flaws of racial eugenics: failure to recognize that the laws of inheritance do not take good and evil into account and that, if perfectibility is possible, it cannot be limited to only one race.

A third exciting new branch of science also contributed to anxieties over global migration patterns. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the germ theory of disease was still relatively new: Robert Koch had published his definitive postulates in 1890, building on Pasteur's work from the previous decade. The idea that diseases were caused by microscopic living organisms that lived and reproduced on people, in water supplies and on food was a truly horrifying discovery. That these disease-causing organisms tended to breed more successfully in unsanitary places where people lived in close quarters only added to the horror. The fact that most of the unsanitary, densely populated neighbourhoods in Britain and the United States were often primarily inhabited by immigrants gave this horror a racial dimension. In many cases, not only were ethnic minorities seen as responsible for disease, but it was also assumed that because they lived in such close quarters and poor conditions, all people in their country of origin lived that way. Hence, because the residents of a Chinatown lived in close quarters and lacked access to fresh water and proper waste disposal, by inference, all Chinese living in China must be dirty and disease-ridden and all China must be similarly overcrowded.

Shiel, Rohmer and London all show a fascination with disease. The endings of *The Yellow Danger* and *The Unparalleled Invasion* where disease becomes the weapon of choice for the white nations, play on the underlying fear that a large influx of foreigners would bring disease—as it certainly had in North America when the Europeans had arrived. By meting out contagion themselves, John Hardy and London's Jacobus Lanningdale alter the imagined progression, and yet continue to uphold the myth of disease-ridden foreigners, as the plagues succeed in killing off impossible numbers of Chinese. Whereas the 1854 severe outbreak of cholera in London did not turn the city into an unpopulated wasteland, John Hardy's single shipload of cholera-injected Chinese succeed in depopulating all of occupied Europe. This plays into the idea that the Chinese spread disease more rapidly and volatily than whites.

In the Fu Manchu novels, however, the scenario is slightly different. Instead of the white characters using disease against the Chinese, Fu Manchu is the master of microbiology. He grows mutant giant mushrooms, isolates serums that mimic death, and breeds deadly bacteria. To

the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century reader, disease itself was terrifying enough, but Rohmer knew that to create an anti-hero with a godlike power over germs, bacteria and fungi would magnify the horror.

M.P. Shiel, Jack London, Sax Rohmer and many other writers of Yellow Peril fiction were inspired by the science and pseudo-science of their time and the fears and anxieties that scientific inquiry often tended to inspire, particularly when it was combined with prejudice. While disease and food security were and continue to be important, in a world so starkly divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’ as it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century western imagination, these concerns become even more volatile: food and land had to remain ‘ours’, while disease and starvation had to fall on ‘them’. Unfortunately, these ‘human miseries’, as Malthus called them, did not respect the artificial boundaries of race and it was a dawning awareness of this fact that made Yellow Peril literature so frightening—and so successful.

### **Clinging to the Orient: the disappearance of the Exotic**

Once upon a time, there was a mysterious unknown land to the east. Stretching from Japan and Mongolia down through the South China Sea, into India, across Persia and Arabia and over to North Africa, this immense conglomeration of nationality, language, religion, culture and trading patterns was known to Europeans as the ‘Orient’. Although they only knew this vast, mysterious land in bits and pieces, the very word ‘Orient’ conjured up visions of exotic places: lush jungles, forbidding deserts, the scent of spices, adoring, docile women in soft silk, the narrow, dark streets of a foreign city.

For nearly a century, the exotic had inspired Europeans with the thrill and the terror of an unknown Other and the fascination of a primitive world, seething with danger, full of fantastical animals and lush greenery and steeped in a strange spirituality. The exotic world had become an integral part of the European world-view because, in contrast to the known, explicable world of western modernity, it

Posited another space, the space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a “civilization” that, by virtue of its *modernity*, was perceived by many writers as being incompatible with certain essential values—or, indeed, the realm of value itself. What modernity is in the process of obliterating “here” might still prove a present possibility in this alternative geopolitical space. (Bongie 5)

This idea of the exotic as a place apart from the already modernized West was an integral part of European exoticism. However, as the West modernized, so too did the East. Railroads



crisscrossed the Orient; science, technology and western ideas competed with traditional ways; war and revolt overturned age-old social and political structures. If Europeans, disenchanted with modernity and alienated by technology and progress, needed to imagine an exotic other world untouched by modernity in order to escape their own oppressive world, what might happen to that mystical place once the real place it came from also began to modernize? Many exoticist writers lamented the loss of their exotic realms to progress, war and political strife.

Yellow Peril literature is about this tension between the modern and the exotic. Exoticism's vision depended on an Other that was culturally and geographically separated from the west. This separation guaranteed that the inherent danger of the exotic world remained on the outside of the modern world, while still exerting its influence on the fantasies of those trapped by modernity. However, as the 'Orient' began to modernize, the separation between East and West seemed less and less. Yellow Peril literature explores the anxieties caused by the technological and ideological rapprochement of two worlds that an exoticist worldview required to be separate. Explains Seshagiri, "realizing that the devil doctor has interwoven the 'here' of the West with the 'there' of the East, Petrie cries 'Oh, my God... can this be England?', incredulous at Fu Manchu's power to render London geographically and culturally dissonant by reordering space and time" (185).

The formerly distant exotic world seeped into the known, modern world; the West was suddenly full of "the dark and secret things of the East, of that mysterious East of which Fu Manchu came, of that jungle of noxious things whose miasma had been wafted Westward with the implacable Chinaman" (Rohmer, *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu*). Fu Manchu and Yen How break down the imaginary barriers between East and West, moving seamlessly between the two worlds and commanding the knowledge and power of both. The exotic has become modern, but in a twisted, terrible way.

Sax Rohmer, as Seshagiri points out, "bluntly projects modernity's threats and promises onto the racially threatening figure of Dr. Fu Manchu" (167). In the figures of Fu Manchu and Yen How, the exotic other suddenly becomes menacing modernity, their evil serving as a reminder that modernity's sought-after knowledge, enlightenment and progress can be just as effective when used for evil as for good.

As modernity encroached into the exotic and the exotic other embraced modernity, the west began to lose the illusory exotic world that had served as a counter-imagining of the story

of modernity. With Fu Manchu and Yen How representing the evil side of modernity, Rohmer and Shiel write in a cast of minor ‘oriental’ characters who are desperately, fantastically and anachronistically exotic, in an attempt to protect the imagined exotic world from the forces of progress.

Typical of what Edward Said would later identify as Orientalism, these characters come from the European idea of the Orient as an unchanging, monolithic and homogeneous entity. Small details about a specific oriental culture, religion or custom, Said claimed, were assumed to apply to the entire imagined Orient. Thus, Sax Rohmer has Burmese dacoits, Malaysian phansigars, Indian thugs, Japanese samurai and Arabian slave girls moving seamlessly through a pan-Asian world of barely-defined national borders, harmoniously uniting against the entire white race. Where a real exotic entity did not exist, both Rohmer and Shiel were happy to invent it: in *The Return of Fu Manchu*, Fu Manchu is to be initiated by the Sublime Prince into the entirely made-up Order of the White Peacock; in *The Yellow Danger*, John Hardy’s gaoler Sin-Wan is said to be “addicted to the orgies of the spirit Samshit”, another imagined deity.

Shiel and Rohmer’s treatment results in a vision of the East as a hyper-exotic world, peopled exclusively by crazed, bloodthirsty half-humans and the excruciatingly beautiful women whom they endanger and enslave. This deliberate attempt to create a world full of larger-than-life, fantastical beings can be seen as an attempt to hold back the progress of modernity into the exotic world by rewriting the modernizing, separate Asian nations as a timeless homogeneous oriental fantasy world.

All of these minor, hyper-exotic characters have in common the fact that their authors saw them as lesser beings. Fu Manchu’s minions are regularly described in animal-like terms, with “blood-lustful eyes, yellow fangs, and gleaming blades” and shaven heads that are “apish low” (Rohmer, *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu*). Though Dr. Petrie and Nayland Smith invariably encounter these exotic specimens in the dark, rainy and presumably cold streets of London, the dacoits are always described as barely clothed: one is “almost naked”; another “dressed solely in a loincloth”. This lesser status corresponds to the European idea of the exotic: a simpler world of people who had remained closer to nature, living unfettered by imposed systems of thought and social structure and thus free to live by their natural human instincts and urges. Rohmer, however, portrays these lesser men as inherently evil rather than fundamentally good and uncorrupted as they were seen by primitivists and earlier exoticists. Instead of being the Noble Savage who

“desired nothing beyond the necessities of life, acquired from nature without work”, who allowed the world’s thinkers to believe “that human beings were essentially good at heart and that somehow from the evils of society their natural innocence might be redeemed” (Carhart 294), Rohmer’s closer-to-nature characters were all inherently evil, their natural human instincts already perverted by Fu Manchu, the representative of modernity and progress in the exotic Orient.

The female exotic has often been portrayed similarly to the Noble Savage: a pure, innocent, naive woman, unfettered by modern sexual and moral strictures. One of the quests of the exoticists was to ‘save’ this woman from the evils of the unenlightened men she lived with, thus preserving her innocence, essential human goodness and unencumbered sexuality. In her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak discusses the concept of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak). For Spivak, however, white men (the British colonial administration in India) wanted to save brown women (Hindu widows who they felt were forced into the practice of *sati*) because it helped justify the British Imperial cause: if the colonial administrators did not rewrite the country’s entire legal system, so went the story they told themselves, Indian women would be forced into self-immolation. In the Fu Manchu novels, the brown—or yellow, or whatever colour an Arabian-Oriental female construct of European fantasy might be—women are being saved from brown men in order to preserve them from modernity, keeping them in their natural and therefore exotic state.

Karamaneh, Fu Manchu’s Arabic slave-girl, becomes the object of Dr. Petrie and Nayland Smith’s ‘saving’ instinct. When she is first introduced, she is described as an exotic beauty:

She threw open her cloak, and it is a literal fact that I rubbed my eyes, half believing that I dreamed. For beneath, she was arrayed in gossamer silk which more than indicated the perfect lines of her slim shape; wore a jeweled girdle and barbaric ornaments; was a figure fit for the walled gardens of Stamboul. (Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*)

Beautiful yet dangerous, Karamaneh, whose name, Petrie reveals, means ‘slave’, is one of Fu Manchu’s trusted associates, yet also saves Petrie and Nayland Smith numerous times. Unable to escape Fu Manchu’s oppression, she begs Petrie and Smith to save her:

“But if you will carry me off”—she clutched me nervously—“so that I am helpless, lock me up so that I cannot escape, beat me if you like, I will tell you all I do know. While he is my master I will never betray him. Tear me from him—by force, do you understand, BY FORCE, and my lips will be sealed no longer.” (Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*)

Karamaneh's divided loyalty between Fu Manchu and the novel's protagonists makes her dangerously exotic and the temptation to save her becomes even stronger. As the Fu Manchu series progresses, Petrie's obsession with redeeming her eventually leads to marriage between the two. Once she becomes his wife, however, she suddenly loses all trappings of the dangerous exotic, keeping only her physically exotic beauty; she resembles in all other ways a typical western wife. Thus does the white man's need to save the exotic woman ultimately only succeed once she has been completely westernized.

Rohmer, Shiel and other Yellow Peril authors create a world where the dangerous, hyper-exotic, sexualized world of the imagined Orient overtakes the real and modernizing worlds of 20<sup>th</sup> century China, Japan, India, or Egypt. This is a desperate attempt to save the imagined Orient from the modernity that had already begun to change it. For the European who, disenchanted with modernity, needed an exotic other world in order to imagine a purer more noble human existence, the Chinese truly were evil for embracing progress, modernity and industrialization and consequently obliterating the exotic Orient forever.

## **Conclusion**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Fu Manchu and his half-naked minions with their crescent-shaped swords seem a mere caricature. After the Second World War and the real occupation of France, Shiel's depiction of shrieking Chinese setting up a Yellow Republic in Paris would have seemed ridiculous. Jack London's matter-of-fact, calculated deployment of biological weapons would make most of his modern-day countrymen cringe in shame for their famous author.

In a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western world where multiculturalism is enshrined in law and where the racial discrimination Mark Twain railed against is no longer legal, the Yellow Peril seems very distant indeed. In the ending of "The Unparalleled Invasion", Jack London relates how, after turning China into a wasteland and massacring the Chinese with biological warfare, "It was a vast and happy intermingling of nationalities that settled down in China in 1982 and the years that followed—a tremendous and successful experiment in cross-fertilization". However, in London's vision, the experiment was successful and the intermingling of nationalities happy because they were all white. How surprised he might be to discover that this intermingling and cross-fertilization was occurring all across the North America he had once imagined threatened by yellow hordes—only the nationalities in question were not all white. How might he feel to discover that whites and Chinese regularly intermarry, or that one can find thousands of young

Chinese students enrolled in once racially-elitist universities? How shocked might he be to learn that public schools in his native Bay Area began offering Mandarin-immersion programmes for non-Chinese-speaking children in 2006?

When Jack London wrote, in 1914, that China was “spilling over the boundaries of her Empire—that was all, just spilling over into the adjacent territories with all the certainty and terrifying slow momentum of a glacier”, that prospect was a thing of horror. Since then, the Chinese *have* spilled over their borders (as they had been doing for centuries); they *have* immigrated all over the world, have intermarried, have embraced the culture of their new countries and have brought their culture with them, watching as it slowly seeped into western culture.

The things that horrified M.P. Shiel, Jack London, and Sax Rohmer at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century no longer horrify us. We now know what the eugenicists failed to realize: that race as they imagined it—white, black, yellow, brown—is merely the genetic result of geographical isolation and that what truly divides the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’ is cultural, thereby allowing a multitude of vantage points from which any number of ‘Selves’ may gaze on any number of ‘Others’.

This does not, of course, mean that racism, discrimination and hatred have been completely erased, however. Fu Manchu, Yen How and the Yellow Peril were created out of fear. This chapter has examined the fears that gave these novels legitimacy in their time: the fear of retribution for colonial wrongs, the fear of overpopulation and scarcity and the fear of losing the treasured vision of an exotic Other world. Although many of these fears were very specific to time and place (most of us no longer battle modernity with exoticism, having come to accept the alienation and loss of value as a necessary trade-off for the comforts of progress), others live on in the human psyche, changing to suit the context of the time or simply waiting to be rekindled. Though time has distanced the 21<sup>st</sup>-century westerner from the direct imperialism under whose banner Sax Rohmer laboured, the world continues to operate in much the same way. The 21<sup>st</sup>-century westerner—where ‘westerner’ no longer denotes hemispherical affiliation but more precisely affluence and economic empowerment—beginning to glimpse the inequities of the global marketplace but unable, like Joseph Conrad 200 years earlier, to envision an alternative mode of operation, may feel a surge of altruism towards the economically-oppressed of the

world, but he may also begin to feel the same fears that Shiel and Rohmer felt, particularly if the world's poor are depicted as culturally 'Other'.

The fear of scarcity still torments us, although what preoccupies us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not only food scarcity, but also the growing scarcity of fossil fuels—necessary to the maintenance of the global economic world order—as well as the dwindling supplies of fresh water, without which food production, and life itself, become impossible. This fear of exploding populations and consequent scarcity could easily take on an ethnic or cultural hue as it did in Yellow Peril literature. How then will we portray the Other, whose very existence, whose sheer numbers threaten our survival? Science and technology have carried us past many of the stumbling blocks that Malthus foresaw, but there may come a day when chemical fertilizer, genetically modified wheat, birth control and welcoming immigration policies can no longer keep the human race from starvation. We can dismiss Fu Manchu and Yen How as simple reflections of an outgrown prejudice, but the fear that created them is real.

Fear can be exacerbated by ignorance and prejudice. Removing the prejudice often whittles the fear down to its most basic state, eliciting non-reactionary, logical solutions and productive debate. However, a simple re-injection of prejudice can turn this level-headedness back into apocalyptic fantasy. Today, the phrase 'yellow peril' inspires no fear. But add the words 'Arab terrorist' to the same fears of scarcity and retribution that inspired Shiel, London, and Rohmer, and the result will be the over-used plot of any number of bestsellers or Hollywood blockbusters.

This is why it is important to study works such as the ones discussed in this essay by focussing on the underlying fears that make the texts come to life, instead of dismissing them because we have overcome the prejudices they embodied. How we depict what we fear is extremely important, not only in order to help us overcome future discrimination, but because positive and negative depictions can have a profound effect on relations—diplomatic, cultural and social— between 'us' and 'them', 'self' and 'other' and 'have' and 'have not'.

# Chapter Two: The Poet who would be Emperor

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*Victor Segalen's Exotic Imagining of China*

## Introduction

France at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a nation pulled apart by a century of political tug-of-war. The people, still largely rural, had been disillusioned by monarchy, republic, revolution and empire alike, having seen the political pendulum swing back and forth through all these regimes over the preceding hundred years. Territorial boundaries had shifted back and forth across the continent; emperors had risen, and fallen; control of Europe had been won, and lost; and radicals of every persuasion had risen up and been knocked down.

France as it pushed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a politically jaded place: Napoleon had promised glory and failed; King Louis-Phillipe had promised reform and reneged; the Second Republic promised political unity but became instead a Second Empire headed by a less-charismatic Napoleon whose reckless foreign policies and lack of his namesake's military genius left the country defeated and humiliated; the Third Republic promised little but delivered endless political squabbling and deep division on the issues of religion, class, and regional integration.

There was little unity in the France of 1900. While the World's Fair awed the crowds of Paris and athletes and spectators swept into the city for the 1900 Summer Olympics, the illiterate Breton peasant farmer and the Basque fisherman continued to live much as they had 400 years ago. Fifty years earlier, the myth of Napoleon had still been alive and many had believed that a new, powerful emperor could unite their fragmented country; by 1900, the world had changed so much many felt there was little that could bridge the gap between the Breton and the Parisian, the rural and the urban, the traditional and the modern.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, colonies seemed to be the answer to a nation's domestic woes, and so France, like many others, attempted to build herself an empire. But colonies, though easily conquered, were not so easily held. They required sustained military presence, consistent and centrally-supported administrative structures and in some cases large amounts of settlers. In short, they required French people, French blood and strong ideological support at home. Unlike in Britain, where the imperial enterprise often remained a governmental structure outside of the reach of the various political tides, in France every expansion, military intervention and administrative change led to political squabbling. The *mission civilisatrice* seemed like a

wonderful thing, as long as not too much French blood was spilt. Colonization for the sake of commerce alone was too base a thing and would never restore France's glory.

Half a world away, through the Suez Canal, across the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca, up the coast of French Indochina, there was another land. Impenetrable for centuries behind a Great Wall, protected by deserts and mountains and surrounded by tributary nations, the French saw a great empire of 400 million people, virtually uncolonized. In this great empire, people followed different religions, spoke many dialects and were of different ethnicities, and yet all 400 million were unified under a single, emperor. Or so it seemed to many of the French who read about and visited China.

In reality, China too was in the middle of great political and social upheaval: the Manchu dynasty was crumbling; foreigners had been pushing at once-unassailable borders and were now using their military might to carve out concessions and steal away tribute states. The Chinese grudgingly accepted Western trade, railroads and technology, and enthusiastically embraced Western medicine, literature and philosophy. In a matter of a few decades, the thousand-year old imperial tradition would be swept away, to be replaced first by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and later by Mao's People's Republic. It was the end of an era.

As the Qing empire crumbled, French generals swept in against the Boxers, and French admirals warily patrolled the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, defending their claim to Indochina and protecting the French Shanghai concession. And with the military—often part of it—came the French writers. Overwhelmed by the rapid changes in their homeland, many of these writers saw in the Chinese empire a world whose glory was still untouched by modernity. They yearned for the continued magnificence of the Chinese imperial tradition. They chronicled this glorious empire; they idealized it; they fantasized about it, and they were awed by it, even as it was crumbling. In short, they fell in love with imperial, exotic China.

The French writers who came to China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not the first to write about China. The Middle Kingdom had inspired the French for centuries: from the writings of Marco Polo and the first reports of the Jesuits to Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine*, China had grown into an exotic other world set in counterpoint to their own drab, religiously autocratic, modernizing one. But whereas earlier writers such as Voltaire had taken source documents (such as the Jesuit-translated Chinese play *The Orphan of Zhao*, or the methodical and analytical reports of the Jesuits) and writings by other Europeans who had also never visited China as their



only sources of information and inspiration about China, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century some of those who wrote about China had actually been there. Pierre Loti spent several months there; Paul Claudel, as a diplomat, lived over a decade there, and Victor Segalen moved his family and spent five years of his short life there.

And yet, did their being there make their portraits of China any less fantastical? Segalen professed a new exoticism, one founded on an appreciation of diversity and a deep knowledge of the Other. He learned Chinese, read the Confucian classics and Chinese histories and injected so much of this into his works that the ordinary French reader, who had come to expect archetypal tales with a thin veneer of exotic sights, sounds and smells, required a near-scholarly interpretation in order to understand his writings.

At the same time, behind Segalen's love for China, lay the incontrovertible fact of his presence there. He, like Loti and Claudel, was not simply a disinterested scholar. Victor Segalen was a naval doctor; Paul Claudel was a diplomat, and Pierre Loti was a high-ranking naval officer. Their presence was an integral part of France's colonial project and their writing, as much as it was an appreciation of a diverse and inspiring Other, was also an important part of their country's imperialist ventures.

This chapter traces the complicated relationship between France, China, exoticism, empire and literature, through the works of French authors Victor Segalen, Paul Claudel and Pierre Loti, focussing primarily on Segalen. The first section provides an overview of the French imperial project, exploring the links between colonialism, the *mission civilisatrice*, literature and public opinion. The second section looks at exoticism, particularly as Segalen imagined it, contrasting his ideas about exoticism as a practice with the way in which the exotic appears in his writing. The third section brings the themes of exoticism and imperialism together through a study of Segalen's writing, by following a recurring theme in exotic literature, that of the observer's desire to penetrate the Other's world.

The esoteric, mystical and sometimes difficult work of Victor Segalen is often seen exactly as he intended it: as a celebration of another world, an aesthetic appreciation of diversity. However, it is all too easy to forget that the work came from the specific historical and political context of imperialism. In this chapter, I propose to connect these two facets of French exoticist writing on China.

## **The Reality and Romance of Empire**

Victor Segalen was a self-styled exoticist and an appreciator of diversity. He was fascinated with China, and passionate about Chinese history, literature, art and philosophy. He learned Chinese and read the Chinese classics. Like Pierre Loti and Paul Claudel before him, he wrote about this fascinating, exotic country, seeking inspiration in the very forms of Chinese literary and artistic works. At a time when European powers sought to control and absorb the nations of Asia, Africa and the Pacific into their empires, when the people of Europe and America warned of a ‘yellow peril’, Segalen was one who truly loved and appreciated the culture of China, who saw it without seeing profit, gain or danger.

Or was he? Victor Segalen As a naval doctor, Victor Segalen was in China as part of the French military presence stationed there to protect the French concession in Shanghai. This was a small part of the same French military presence that had brought Pierre Loti in 1900 as part of the Eight Nation Alliance to suppress the Boxer Uprising; it was the same French military that had fought China over control of Tonkin in 1885 and remained in Indochina long after Segalen’s death. Despite his love for China, Segalen, like Loti and Claudel, was part of the larger French imperial project. Though he was a doctor, and his own role was largely a humanitarian one, exotic literature that presented French readers with a romanticized depiction of faraway French possessions was just as important to the discourse of French imperialism as military conquest and political subjugation. However, perhaps because of Segalen’s genuine attachment to China and his somewhat mystical relationship to it, his works are often studied outside of the larger imperial context that made them possible.

In this section, I propose to contextualize the works of Segalen, as well as those of Loti and Claudel, within the scope of the French imperialism that brought their authors to China. It is my contention that although commerce and power were the driving forces behind much of European imperialism, French imperialism was held up by various forms of soft power that writers of exotic literature were in an ideal position to deliver. Although many of these authors, particularly Segalen, deplored the ravages of colonialism and did not consciously produce works with a specific political agenda, the ideological link between works of exoticism and the French imperial project is much stronger than it might seem.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French Empire consisted mainly of territories in Africa, the Pacific and Indochina. Although France had held colonies since the 1534 founding of New

France, between 1815 and 1859 official systematic colonial policy had been sporadic: as Célestin and DalMolin explain, “prior to this date, the French colonies already in place were often essentially claimed for France by individual French entrepreneurs, explorers and missionaries and not as part of a proactive French official colonial program” (66). Napoleon III’s colonial policy included support for the construction of the Suez Canal in 1859, and featured an ambitious program of assimilation in Algeria, the acquisition of Cochinchina and a short-lived and ill-fated Mexican Empire.

However, despite his dreams of overseas empire and liberal colonial policies, colonial enterprise championed by Napoleon III might have fizzled out, for, as Robinson points out, France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was essentially self-sufficient and could gain little economic advantage from colonies. Agricultural production and population remained at mutually sustainable levels, he explains, while

French industry developed neither the voracious demand for food and raw materials which was characteristic of British industry, nor its huge surpluses of manufactures and capital for export. Nor, unlike British agriculture, was French farming sacrificed to the Baal of cheap food from abroad. In this the French peasant was more fortunate than the Scottish and Irish tenantry or the English farm labourers. He could afford to stay at home while they were squeezed out to colonise new lands overseas. It was this security of the peasantry on the land, reinforced by their voting power, which deprived French empire-builders of colonists. (Robinson vii)

Over and above economic considerations, one thing kept the project of French empire afloat when it might otherwise have proved an unwise and useless proposition. While Napoleon III’s Suez Canal project was considered a great achievement and his poorly-managed Mexican campaign an embarrassing failure, it was his final defeat in the Franco-Prussian War that would shape the French imperial project for decades to come, spawning hatred and patriotism, colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric, military zeal and political scandal.

In 1870, Napoleon III was defeated by the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian War and the territory of Alsace-Lorraine was annexed to the new German Empire. This defeat would have a lasting influence on French politics and colonial policy. Coupled with a crippling war indemnity and several years of German occupation, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine led to a profound sense of national humiliation, one that persisted throughout the first four decades of the French Third Republic, ending only with the return of the territories following the First World War.

Throughout those four decades, the annexed provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were a source of bitterness used by every interest group and faction to call politicians to task. In the

rhetoric of Empire, pro-colonialists insisted that only by expanding the overseas empire could France regain the honour that had been lost with the ‘pays perdu’; at the same time, anti-colonialists called politicians to task, berating them for wasting military and financial resources in distant lands that they should instead be directing toward reclaiming Alsace-Lorraine.

Out of this sense of wounded national pride and desire to restore the country’s honour, came the rhetoric of the *mission civilisatrice*. Having less economic need for colonies, French intellectuals and military leaders could look down on the British or the Dutch and style themselves the enlightened, duty-bound bringers of civilization to the welcoming North Africans, Indochinese and Pacific Islanders who accepted the French as their protectors. Colonial conquest could never be justified by commerce alone, but became a humanitarian enterprise whose justification lay in the improvement of the colonized and whose undertaking, “combined with pride in fulfilling this mission oneself rather than leaving it to others” (Brunschwig 167), inspired fervent nationalism and elevated a nation’s status. As Charles Depincé, a member of France’s Congress for Colonial Sociology explained in a speech:

A conquering race which confines itself to exploiting the territories it has taken and their inhabitants, having only material benefits for itself in mind, is lacking in its duty to human society, is being false to itself and to humanity, and ceases to be a superior race by the very fact of not carrying out such a race’s duties. On the other hand, it will be fulfilling these duties and justifying its conquest both in its own eyes and in the eyes of the civilised world if, in taking by the hand, so to speak, the indigenous populations committed to its charge, it seeks gradually to raise their standards until they attain its own, improving their welfare, raising their moral standards and developing their intelligence. (qtd. in Brunschwig, 169).

Because there was little economic need for colonies, the French imperial project was characterized by initial government-supported military zeal generally followed by sparse settlement and fluctuating financial and ideological support from the metropole. While the British ensured colonial domination by settling larger numbers of colonists in certain territories and installing complex administrative systems, the French often held onto their colonies through a combination of military force and assimilationist policies. Lacking colonists from home, the French instead created French subjects out of the colonized. An instruction to an official taking charge of the small Pacific island of Rapa directed “Your role will consist above all in making the natives love France, their new patrie” (Matsuda 4). In French Indochina, government minister and explorer Auguste Pavie crisscrossed the French-claimed territories in a canoe, mapping, collecting plants and, according to his own journals, bringing the natives tales of the love their new *patrie* bore them. As Matsuda explains: “Pavie’s own reports from Cambodia detail him

selectively as a man in a canoe taking the hands of villagers and insisting, ‘The French are good, they will love you as I love you and will take you to their hearts’” (144).

Matsuda argues that the method behind French imperialism involves a two-way rhetoric of love, where control in the colonies is achieved by inspiring a nationalist sentiment toward France in the colonized while at the same time ensuring support at home by creating a colonial mystique through tales of exotic lands, loving natives, and a romanticized sense of duty. If one adds the deep and bitter wounds to national honour from the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Matsuda’s premise, the French imperial project becomes not simply a story of love, but one of passion—a passion that includes Matsuda’s love, but also a powerful hatred and disdain for other more mercenary colonizers, a desire for revenge and a need to rekindle France’s national glory.

The French, therefore, carried out the act of colonization in the name of love; dominion of the colonized could only be achieved by making them love the mother country, through governance that included love, humanitarianism and a paternalistic protection. In contrast to the “new-caught sullen peoples, half devil and half child” (Kipling) of the British vision, many French authors depicted the colonized as happy servants, willing wives and sexual partners or inexperienced rulers thankful for French guidance.

Victor Segalen’s *René Leys*, written in 1913-14 and published posthumously in 1922, provides an excellent example of the French author’s telling of these ‘loving’ imperial relationships. The Chinese in the novel are welcoming to the French, taking their presence in Beijing—as well as the existence of a foreign Legation Quarter where Chinese are forbidden—as a matter of course. Of the Chinese women encountered in the novel, one is the wife of a European, another is encountered in a brothel (but is, it turns out, actually a member of the secret police led by René Leys himself), a third is a married Chinese woman who, the narrator supposes, secretly desires him, while the fourth is the Empress Dowager with whom René Leys becomes entangled in a supposed relationship. The Chinese rulers are all in need of French guidance: without the protection and counsel of René Leys, the Emperor, the Regent and the Empress Dowager would all be in mortal danger. So desperate are they for the help of the young European that they not only allow him free access to the Forbidden City, but also appoint him head of the Secret Police.

Acts of French colonialism, according to the French, were respectful, humanitarian undertakings. Other Europeans were barbarous and cruel, but the French conscience was pure.

Throughout *Les derniers jours de Pékin*, Pierre Loti is scrupulous in pointing out how the French soldiers did not participate in the cruelty, looting or destruction that was all around them. Other nations looted, while the French, according to Loti's description, meticulously catalogued the treasures of the Imperial City, packing them away during their occupation of the Imperial Palace. As for the French soldiers, "là, partout, je les ai vus bons et presque fraternels envers les plus humbles Chinois" (Loti). In one passage, he describes clay statuettes encountered in a marketplace. Originally, the figurines depicted only Chinese people, but since the arrival of the Eight-Nation Alliance, the Tianjin artisans have begun producing figurines of foreign soldiers:

Or, les minutieux modeleurs ont donné aux soldats de certaines nations européennes, que je préfère ne pas désigner, des expressions de colère féroce, leur ont mis en main des sabres au clair ou des triques, des cravaches levées pour cingler. Quant aux nôtres, coiffés de leur bérêt de campagne et très Français de visage avec leurs moustaches faites en soie jaune ou brune, ils portent tous tendrement dans leurs bras des bébés chinois. Il y a plusieurs poses, mais toujours procédant de la même idée; le petit Chinois quelquefois tient le soldat par le cou et l'embrasse; ailleurs le soldat s'amuse à faire sauter le bébé qui éclate de rire; ou bien il l'enveloppe soigneusement dans sa capote d'hiver... Ainsi donc, aux yeux de ces patients observateurs, tandis que les autres troupiers continuent de brutaliser et de frapper, le troupier de chez nous est celui qui, après la bataille, se fait le grand frère des pauvres bébés ennemis. (Loti)

Throughout the book, Loti contrasts the respectful, caring work of the French soldiers with the brutality of the soldiers from "certaines autres contrées, que je ne puis trop désigner". His insistence on the goodness of his soldiers becomes one of the book's most persistent refrains. Although this was patently untrue and French soldiers are reported to have participated in the same atrocities of which all European soldiers at the time were guilty (Hsieh, *From Occupation to Revolution*), Loti has bought into the story of a fraternal and humanitarian imperialism.

French Empire, however, was not built solely on the paternalistic, humanitarian love that Loti's good soldiers embody. Another important difference between the French and British imperial vision is the way the two cultures viewed interracial marriage. In the British Empire, stark division was necessary between white settlers and natives. In the French vision, however, mixed marriage was romanticized both as an exotic love story and as a patriotic act binding the colonized to their new *patrie*. As Matsuda contends, in the story of the *mission civilisatrice*, marriage represented the ultimate civilizing act: with one union, the 'barbare' could be brought gently and lovingly to French civilization; through marriage, assimilation of the conquered people could be accomplished without bloodshed or tyrannical laws. The Frenchman who married the exotic Pacific Islander or Indochinese woman could claim a part in his country's glory, having assimilated and 'civilized' a 'native'. However, the dutiful colonist was not taking

part in a purely one-way transaction: while he ‘civilized’ his bride, he was also able to gain access to the mystique of her world, in some cases becoming not a Frenchman with an assimilated wife, but a hybrid: half-Frenchman, half-assimilated himself into his wife’s mysterious world, moving between the two worlds perhaps with ease, perhaps awkwardly (Matsuda 148).

It is perhaps this sort of cultural translucency that Victor Segalen sought in depicting various forms of French-Chinese relationships. The narrator of *René Leys* determinedly seeks “la pénétration chinoise” and finds himself in awe of his neighbour Jarignoux, who has succeeded in marrying a Chinese woman, an act only permitted him after acquiring Chinese citizenship, which in turn he could only apply for after fulfilling a ten-year residency requirement. However, there is little in Jarignoux’s marriage about ‘civilizing’ his Chinese wife: he explains to the narrator that, at the Ministry of Communications, “c’était indispensable pour ma situation de ‘fonctionnaire’ et surtout mes contrats d’entreprise...” (Segalen, *René Leys* 24). Later, when he learns of the supposed affair between the Empress Dowager and René Leys, the narrator wonders which of the two he should congratulate, “Elle, d’avoir choisi avec gout en dehors de sa race? Lui d’avoir été choisi par Elle?” (164). Although neither scenario reflects a strictly assimilationist or ‘civilizing’ inter-racial marriage that might have taken place in a colony proper, Segalen’s Chinese scenarios nonetheless underline the ideological nature of mixed-race romance. As Matsuda explains, in Indochina “the ‘possession of the native’ developed formally and was widely explored through civil policy and the possibilities of colonial marriage and mixed liaisons” (148). In this context, with mixed marriages being actively explored as a tool of colonial possession, Segalen too, is conducting his own explorations of the idea. In his telling, the mixed liaison always results in greater ‘penetration’ for the Frenchman into an otherwise closed Chinese world.

If, as Matsuda claims, the French colonial empire was indeed an Empire of Love where possession, servitude, alliance and conquest were all articulated through tales of love—humanitarian love, patriotic love or erotic, exotic love—then how can the tellers of these tales, the colonial writers of exotic literature, be seen as other than active participants in their country’s great civilizing mission, as accomplices in the disenfranchisement of the colonized? And if Matsuda has clearly shown the connection between imperialism and love story, Robinson just as succinctly demonstrates the link between the colonial military and the French colonial author,

arguing that in the rhetoric of Empire that spoke not of love but of restoring national pride, the author was equally implicated:

It was the military, far more than the geographers and intellectuals, who felt the need to restore the national honour; for them it was a professional need; it was they who stood to gain most, in decorations, promotion and glory, from a set of brilliant victories on colonial fields, and they who had the best opportunities to carry the flag forward. The French colonel with one hand on his Gatling and the other on the proofs of his next book was no myth. (Robinson x)

However, as much as authors such as Segalen and Loti were part of the French imperial project, it is important to remember that imperialism as they knew it was not yet an evil the broader society condemned. Segalen spoke against it in his Tahitian novel *Les immémoriaux*, but in general, the three authors took their country's presence in China as a matter of course and believed they were protecting the Chinese (or at the very least, the Chinese Christians). The many French intellectuals, authors and military officers who administered, fought for and wrote about French Empire truly believed in the *mission civilisatrice*. As Brunschwig points out,

In the eyes of its agents, imperialism—like the humanitarianism that preceded it—was a worthy thing. Its chief advocates evoked the great ideals of the period: the ideals of nationalism and of humanitarianism. Unwitting of the problems and evils they were engendering, they had clear consciences. (167).

In this regard, Segalen simply saw and admired China through the context of this 'worthy thing' his country was doing. If he had his doubts—and Tahiti had certainly given him reason to doubt—they did not stop him from building his own relationship with China: a relationship built in the shadow of imperialism, but not wholly a part of it; a relationship more artistic and aesthetic than political, based on an appreciation of diversity that he called exoticism.

### **Segalen's Exoticism**

In Victor Segalen's *Essay on Exoticism*, he sets out the tenets for a new, enlightened exoticism, one based on an aesthetic appreciation of diversity. He condemns the "tourists" who see only the clichés of coconut trees and savages and urges his fellow-writers to seek out difference and diversity. He laments the veneer of the exotic that has become commonplace in writing and art and calls for a new vision, one where exoticism becomes a reaction caused by the shock of experiencing difference— "la réaction vive et curieuse au choc d'une individualité forte contre une objectivité dont elle perçoit et déguste la distance" (Segalen, *Essai* 25).

Exoticism, particularly the way Segalen envisioned it, provided a new lens through which to see the world. Refreshingly different from the 'us' and 'them', 'white' and 'non-white',



‘modern’ and ‘backward’ ways of seeing the world, exoticism celebrated everything that standard world-views relegated to the realm of ‘what we are not’. And yet Segalen’s brand of exoticism, coming as it was from his early 20<sup>th</sup>-century vantage point, was a difficult theory to apply in practice, for it was full of contradictions and unresolvable tensions between past and present, tradition and modernity, uncorrupted Other and colonial reality.

In this section, I will discuss the phenomenon of exoticism. Specifically, I will examine Segalen’s notion of exoticism and contrast it to how the exotic actually appears in his works.

According to Segalen, exoticism was a simple concept which he called an aesthetic of diversity: “*Exotisme*: je n’entends par là qu’une chose, mais universelle: le sentiment du Divers; et par esthétique, l’exercice de ce même sentiment; sa poursuite, son jeu, sa plus grande liberté; sa plus grande acuité; enfin sa plus claire et profonde beauté” (Essai 67). The “sentiment du Divers” he describes as a feeling of ecstasy brought on by the shock of finding oneself in an unfamiliar environment. Caused by an initial “inadaptation au milieu” (Essai 21), the sensation is buoyed by the ephemeral nature of the unfamiliar surroundings, but disappears once the individual has become familiar with the strange *milieu*.

Exoticist writing, according to Segalen, needed to be more than just the travel writer’s description of sights and sounds: “n’est-ce pas à un cran plus haut, de dire, non pas tout crûment sa vision, mais par un *transfert* instantanée, constant, l’écho de sa présence?” (Essai 18). This required a complete subjective immersion in the exotic world, one deep enough to allow the *Exote* to describe the effect of his own insertion into the world of the Other:

Ont-ils [the mere ‘travel writers’] révélé ce que ces choses et ces gens pensaient en eux-mêmes et d’eux? Car il y a peut-être, du voyageur au spectacle, un autre choc en retour dont vibre ce qu’il voit. Par son intervention, parfois si malencontreuse, si aventurière (surtout aux vénérables lieux silencieux at clos), est-ce qu’il ne va pas perturber le champ d’équilibre établi depuis des siècles? (18).

This belief in the existence of a centuries-old balance is typical of exoticist thinking. The task of the true *Exote* is also challenging, Segalen affirms, because the term ‘Exoticism’ has been co-opted by writers of a baser sort of ‘exotic literature’ built from colonial and tropical clichés, clichés which Segalen villifies at great length in the notes for *Essai*. As Hsieh explains:

The first thing Segalen intended to do was to rid the word ‘exoticism’ of all it ordinarily evokes. The list of clichés associated with it would include coconut trees, torrid skies; palm trees, camels, colonial helmets, dark skins, and yellow sun; ships, the rolling sea (‘grandes houles’), spices, perfumes, enchanted isles, native uprisings, incomprehensible and bizarre customs, death and destruction” (12).

There were many things for Segalen that exoticism could not be. It could not be the “impressions de voyages” (Essai 17) of Pierre Loti. It could not celebrate the mixing and hybridization of separate cultures, “voyages mécaniques confrontant les peuples et, horreur, les mêlant, les mélangeant sans les faire se battre” (77), despite the fact that inter-racial love and relationships are portrayed in many of his works. Visions of true exoticism could not place women in anything but a traditional role, as Segalen advocated “condamnation absolue du féminisme, sorte de monstrueuse inversion sociale” (78). And finally, exoticism could never belong to the colonist, “surgit avec le désir du commerce indigène le plus commercial” or the colonial administrator “la notion même d’une administration centralisée, de lois bonnes à tous et qu’il *doit* appliquer, lui fausse d’emblée tout jugement, le rend sourd aux *disharmonies* (ou harmonies du Divers)” (40). In fact, as Bongie explains, although his first novel *Les Immémoriaux* chronicles the effects of colonial contact on the Maori civilization in Tahiti,

The greater part of Segalen’s work after his first novel is a cancellation, a sweeping away, of the colonial context that generated the *Immémoriaux*’s tragic outlook [...] Colonialism, bearing with it the memory of a death (death of a traditional culture, death of the exotic subject), had to be forgotten: not so much openly criticized as silenced, since even to mention it was invariably to recall the *Exote*’s degradation and his lack of Other horizons. (115).

The exotic world, above all, was not a place for new ideas. The westernization of the East via the *mission civilisatrice* was anathema, threatening to turn the world and Difference itself into one homogeneous “Royaume du Tiède” (Segalen, Essai 67). All forms of political reorganization eroded the exotic. Segalen lamented the political revolutions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, refusing to consider revolution in terms of how it benefitted the people to whom the country belonged; instead, he despised revolution because it was a threat to the exotic vision. He mourned the 1911 end of the Qing Empire acutely, with an intense sadness, and affirmed that only the past held any merit for a true exoticist.

In theory, Segalen’s *Exotisme* seems strangely short-circuited, close-minded and anachronistic. If defined solely based on his reflections in *Essai*, it is a doctrine characterized more by what it cannot be than by what it is. But *Essai*, after all, was never completed, and while Segalen may have achieved the first stated goal of the essay—“avant tout, débayer le terrain. Jeter par-dessus bord tout ce que contient de mésusé et de rance ce mot d’exotisme” (22)—he says little about what exoticism should be, and how a writer who must shun coconuts, dark skin, hot sun and the like was to write as an *exote*.

Despite the seeming narrowness of *Essai*, Segalen's travels in China speak of open-mindedness, cultural immersion, and inspiration. Before leaving for China, he learned Chinese; once there, he embarked on a five-month cross-country tour of China that took him to the Great Wall, Xian and Sichuan, along the Yangzi and into southern China. He later set out on several archaeological expeditions in search of Chinese tombs and statuary and served as the personal physician to Yuan Shikai's son. He delved into the Confucian *Annals* and the Chinese histories, and studied these and other Chinese classics, for their forms as much as for their content. Segalen's *Essai* and its sweeping pronouncements on exoticism are only a small part of Segalen's vision. His life, lived so as to experience the Other as deeply and multi-dimensionally as possible, provides a model for embracing diversity. But to understand Segalen's exoticism, one must turn to his work, accepting all the while that Segalen's writing was a process of exploration itself, and not a completed ideological project.

Because the colonial, the hybrid and the revolutionary could not represent "le sentiment du Divers", Segalen's exoticism could only lead him into an idealized past. Set in an Imperial timeframe that straddles the border between Real and Imaginary, *Stèles*, *Peintures* and *Le fils du ciel* all partake of a backward-looking exoticism, one that can only admit as exotic what has already ceased to exist.

This notion of temporal exoticism is somewhat at odds with Segalen's definition of the exotic as resulting from an "inadaptation au milieu" because, in turning to the past, he ceases to experience his own actual *milieu*. However, as Bongie notes, this turning away from the ever-changing present is a solution to the fundamental contradiction of exoticism: exoticism, as a search for a traditional world that has been lost with modernity, is necessarily short-circuited because the lost tradition is only apparent once it has already been erased by modernity. Exoticism "presumes that at some point in the future, what has been lost will be attained 'elsewhere' in a realm of adventure that bypasses the contemporary present" (Bongie 15). Although this search for what has been lost leads to places that are geographically Other, ultimately these Other places are merely stand-ins for what is truly being sought: the past. This, however, is where exoticism departs from the simple *récit de voyage* and becomes a purely literary project. As Bongie explains, discussing Segalen and Joseph Conrad together

Something more than a sterile nostalgia is at stake in this attachment to a cause that has once and for all been lost. Once Segalen and Conrad have registered the impossibility of the ideological project that they 'naively' advocated in the time of their youth, they choose not to abandon this

empty project but rather to reinscribe themselves within what they know to be no more (yet no less) than a dream. (20)

This reinscription leads Segalen to write himself into his own literature as first-person narrator, reinventing himself not as a European outsider, but as one initiated into the secrets of China. In *Le fils du ciel* he chooses for narrator the Emperor's annalist, whose intimate knowledge of the Forbidden City and daily contact with the Emperor and his court provides Segalen the access, in his imagination, to a past he could only idealize. Likewise, in *Stèles* many of the poems use the voice of an exoticised Chinese persona—the poems are narrated, variously, by Chinese emperors, sages, warriors and poets. The section “Stèles face au midi” comprises poems that are imperial decrees or musings on spirituality and wisdom, in the first-person voice of the Emperor. This Emperor, although occasionally anchored to a specific era, is an all-encompassing, timeless, all-knowing symbol. The following passage is typical of Segalen's Emperor-narrator: “Que l'homme recevant mes largesses ou courbé sous mes coups connaisse à travers moi le Fils les desseins du Ciel ancestral” (Stèles 61). Segalen's narrator-emperor represents idealized, Confucian order: he decrees; he judges; he punishes and doles out spiritual guidance.

In the stèle “Édit funéraire”, Segalen again becomes the Emperor as he directs the preparations for his death and burial site:

Moi l'Empereur ordonne ma sépulture : cette montagne hospitalière, le champ qu'elle entoure est heureux. Le vent et l'eau dans les veines de la terre et les plaines du vent sont propices ici. Ce tombeau agréable sera le mien.

O

Barrez donc la vallée entière d'une arche quintuple : tout ce qui passe est ennobli.  
Étendez la longue allée honorifique : — des bêtes ; des monstres ; des hommes.  
Levez là-bas le haut fort crénelé. Percez le trou solide au plein du mont.  
Ma demeure est forte. J'y pénètre. M'y voici. Et refermez la porte, et maçonnez l'espace devant elle.  
Murez le chemin aux vivants.

O

Je suis sans désir de retour, sans regrets, sans hâte et sans haleine. Je n'étouffe pas. Je ne gémis point. Je règne avec douceur et mon palais noir est plaisant.  
Certes la mort est plaisante et noble et douce. La mort est fort habitable. J'habite dans la mort et m'y complais.

O

Cependant, laissez vivre, là, ce petit village paysan. Je veux humer la fumée qu'ils allument dans le soir.  
Et j'écouterai des paroles.

Although the voice of the Emperor-narrator in this stèle has a timeless feel, the “arche quintuple” and the “longue allée honorifique—des bêtes; des monstres; des hommes” both refer

to the Ming tombs in Beijing that Segalen photographed and intended to include in his book on Chinese statuary, *Chine, la grande statuaire*. Segalen would no doubt have read how the Emperor Yongle, the first of 13 emperors buried in these tombs, selected his own burial site and designed his mausoleum. Paul Claudel also described a visit to the Ming tombs in *Connaissance de l'Est*. He relates the walk along the seven-kilometre Spirit Way: “formant une allée de leurs couples alternatifs, à mes yeux s’offrent de monstrueux animaux. Face à face, répétant successivement agenouillés et debout, leurs paires, béliers, chevaux unicornes, chameaux, éléphants”. In “Édit funéraire” Segalen’s emperor-narrator orders the building of the same beast-flanked path Claudel walked. Similarly, Segalen’s instruction that “ma demeure est forte...murez le chemin aux vivants” echoes Claudel’s description of the unassailable wall:

Entre les avancements massifs des bastions carrés qui le flanquent, et derrière la tranchée profonde et définitive du troisième rû, un mur ne laisse point douter que ce soit ici le terme de la route. Un mur et rien qu’un mur, haut de cent pieds et large de deux cents. Meurtrie par l’usure des siècles, l’inexorable barrière montre une face aveugle et maçonnée.

Where Segalen and Claudel differ is their conception of death. For Claudel, death is final. The tombs he visits are but a futile attempt to hold back death. When confronted with death in the colossal form of the Ming tombs, Claudel, as a Catholic, cannot subscribe to the Chinese conception of the afterlife, where the dead maintain a seemingly permanent presence in the world of the living:

Les pompeux catafalques du seuil n’ont point retenu le mort, le cortège défunt de sa gloire ne le retarde pas ; il franchit les trois fleuves, il traverse le parvis multiple et l’encens. Ni ce monument qu’on lui a préparé ne suffit à le conserver ; il le troue et entre au corps même et aux œuvres de la terre primitive. C’est l’enfouissement simple, la jonction de la chair crue au limon inerte et compact ; l’homme et le roi pour toujours est consolidé dans la mort sans rêve et sans résurrection.

Segalen, on the other hand, wants to imagine an intermediary world between death and life. He is comfortable with the Chinese idea that the dead continue to interact with the living and that their existence in the afterlife is less mystical and more down-to-earth than in western religion. The Yongle Emperor, “sans haleine” and sealed up in his dark tomb continues to reign “avec douceur et mon palais noir est plaisant”, all the while taking pleasure in breathing in the smoke from “ce petit village paysan”.

It is by embracing Chinese ideas of death and the afterlife that Segalen is able to interact with the exotic across time. Although his vision of the past is an imagining, he is not simply re-creating the past by re-telling history; instead, he is seeing it through the interactions between

living and dead that had taken place in China for thousands of years. This allows the dead to be, for him, less dead than they would be to an unaware European, in turn allowing him to resurrect the past. Segalen's exoticism, therefore, is not simply about idealizing a past that has definitively been lost, but also about embracing alternative belief systems and through those belief systems gaining access to the past.

Segalen's explorations of the exotic across time allow him to build an exotic world that, while imaginary, is less hindered by cultural differences than that of his contemporaries. While other writers of exotic literature used the exotic world as a backdrop for tales that nonetheless remained strongly based on European-style morality, desires and world view, Segalen's deeper understanding of Chinese culture allowed him to write with a Chinese sense of ethics, an awareness of Chinese sensitivities and using Chinese-inspired literary forms. As Hsieh points out, "Segalen recreates China from within the culture, adopting the point of view of the Emperor, a court annalist, or simply a Chinese man of letters. This China may never have existed outside his imagination, but it is composed of entirely 'authentic' elements drawn from a wide range of Chinese sources" (19).

However, if Segalen was able to find an authentic exoticism in China's past, he remained largely unable to reconcile present-day China with the Imperial China of his imagination. Despite his unwillingness to accept modernity and western ideas inside the China he envisioned, he nonetheless made several attempts, most notably in the novel *René Leys*. *René Leys* and the conflicts that Segalen addresses therein will be discussed in depth in the following section.

## **Forbidden China**

In *René Leys*, the European narrator is obsessed with penetrating inside the walls of the Forbidden City; in *Le fils du ciel*, intrigues inside the imperial palace are narrated by the emperor's secret annalist; in *Steles*, Segalen creates imaginary imperial edicts and turns them into prose poems. Segalen's intense desire to get inside 'la ville violette', inside the imperial court, and inside the emperor's head verge on the obsessive.

This section uses Segalen's obsession with penetrating the impenetrable as a basis for an analysis of his work, with a particular focus on *René Leys*. Why was Segalen so fascinated with getting inside the parts of China that expressly excluded him? What did the Forbidden City, the Emperor, and the tombs that he searched for represent for the *Exote*? How does this vision incorporate the notions presented in the previous two sections, imperialism and exoticism? In

this section, I will examine *René Leys* as a testament to the contradictions that must necessarily exist between exoticism, western imperialism and modernity, contradictions that Segalen had thought to escape by exoticizing the past.

While much of Segalen's work straddles the uncertain ground between prose and poetry, *René Leys* is perhaps Segalen's most novelistic volume, featuring a defined plot, well-developed characters, gripping suspense and a clear beginning and end. It recounts the adventures of a narrator named 'Victor Segalen', who, while not a direct autobiographical representation of the author, shares many of the same characteristics, allowing Segalen to create an avatar through which he can fictionally explore a world he could not access in real life. . Segalen-narrator, intensely determined to gain access to the closed world of the Imperial palace, decides to engage a Chinese tutor, because, after several failed attempts, "je m'accorde une chance dernière de pénétrer dans le 'Dedans'. C'est de me servir de son langage, le dur 'Mandarin du Nord'" (71). Segalen-narrator engages the services of a young Belgian named René Leys. Seventeen years old, the son of a grocer, young René Leys has already secured the prestigious post of *professeur* at the École des Nobles and his talent in languages allows him to interact with locals and foreigners in French, English, Mandarin and Shanghaiese.

Before long, however, the narrator's interest in his young tutor is further awakened when René Leys reveals that he has been 'Inside' and had seen the Guangxu Emperor before his death. As the novel progresses, René Leys feeds Segalen-narrator small yet progressively more intriguing details about his involvement in palace life. He affirms having been the Guangxu Emperor's only friend at his death and is now friends with Emperor Puyi's Regent; he is even the head of the Palace Secret Police. When his network of prostitutes that he has recruited into his Secret Police informs him of a plot to kill the Regent, he single-handedly defuses the bomb, an act for which the Regent rewards him with a concubine. Unfortunately, he finds himself in a quandary over how to accept this concubine, as he is also the lover of the Empress Dowager Long Yu, who he believes is responsible for the attempts on the Regent's life.

This is all revealed little by little to Segalen-narrator as the novel progresses and, astoundingly, the narrator does not doubt René Leys' accounts until the very end. The reader, on the other hand, cannot possibly have such blind faith, as Segalen-author ensures that the other characters create an uncertainty in the reader's mind. While the narrator is convinced that René Leys spends his nights on Secret Police business, his neighbour Jarignoux warns him that the

young Belgian is simply a good-for-nothing *noceur*. In the weeks preceding the fall of the Qing, Maître Wang, Segalen's previous tutor who also belongs to the Secret Police (but through no connection to René Leys), asks to hide out at Segalen's house. Segalen replies that he is already sheltering the young Belgian and that "je suis au regret : mais les «hautes fonctions» de Monsieur Lei devenant fort dangereuses pour lui, je tiens à lui conserver cet asile chez moi" (204). As things are likely to fall apart, Segalen divulges René Leys' position as Chief of the Secret Police. However, Maître Wang replies dismissively that "Il y avait bien, dit-il, un étranger employé dans cette confrérie, mais avec un grade inférieur. C'était un Allemand. On l'a convaincu de vol, et chassé. Le chef actuel est un Pékinois nommé Siu" (205).

Through all this, the narrator believes René Leys and only begins to doubt him after René Leys convinces him to also shelter the Empress Dowager. On the night that Beijing is supposed to burn—"Cette nuit sera donc la nuit de grand débat; peut-être de la grande lutte—les cinq mille Honanais payés par le vieux Yuan, renforcés de tous les mécontents, payés aussi, vont assiéger le Palais défendu par la Garde Impériale, la P.S. [Police Secrète] et ce brave petit René à leur tête" (218)—they sit up all night awaiting the arrival of the young man's Imperial lover, but she does not arrive. It is only at this moment, as the fall of the Empire extinguishes his dreams of touching its mysteries that Segalen begins to doubt his friend's stories. He demands the truth, and proof. To his question "*oui ou non*, as-tu couché avec l'Impératrice?" René Leys replies "Oui. J'ai couché avec Elle... La preuve? L'enfant" (225). Annoyed that René Leys seems to have an answer to everything, the narrator points out the one thing he had forgotten to include in his tales:

Cependant j'ai un conseil à te donner... C'est d'avoir moins peur des puits, de laisser claquer des bombes chimiques qui ne font de mal qu'à leurs émissaires, et de veiller un peu plus, pour ta sécurité personnelle, sur un danger culinaire que tu ne m'as l'air d'ignorer tout à fait... dont tu ne m'as jamais parlé, et qui est pourtant d'un emploi... historique, en Chine.

Il écoute avec un sérieux tel que je voudrais me taire, tout d'un coup... Mais le sérieux est vraiment trop déplacé. Tant pis :

—As-tu songé dans *«tes histoires»*, au poison? (227).

Beijing does not burn after all that night and the Empress Dowager does not come. The next morning, René Leys is dead. Unwilling to allow a medical autopsy that would entail "la profanation de ce beau corps" (233), the narrator decides to conduct his own investigation, by returning to the only reliable piece of evidence in his possession: the manuscript he has been



writing, in journal form, based on his observations and conversations with René Leys. In it, he discovers the true nature of René Leys' deception:

René Leys, fils économe d'épicier belge, ne songeait guère aux chinois, encore moins au palais, quand, pour la première fois, je l'ai pris pour confident du mystère du Palais... Il est vrai que sa réponse dépassait déjà mon attente. C'est moi le premier, qui, sur la foi de Maître Wang, l'entretins de l'existence d'une Police Secrète : huit jours après, il en faisait partie, et m'enrôlait au bout de deux mois (237).

Every story René Leys told Segalen could be traced back to a suggestion from Segalen himself. Even his death rests on the narrator's shoulders, since "Le poison : c'est *moi* qui le lui ai proposé, c'est de moi qu'il l'a reçu, accepté et bu" (237).

Who is this narrator, so desperate to know, enter and absorb the last rays of glory from a dying Empire? So obsessed that a young man seeking his friendship should need to invent tales about a secret life on the 'Inside', choosing to poison himself rather than reveal his deception? The narrator is Victor Segalen—the author—and the novel *René Leys* is his attempt to accept the inescapable contradictions between modernity and tradition, between the timeless exotic and the fleeting, ever-changing present, and between his vision of an alternate, exotic world and the lived, real world that seemed to him to be transforming into one homogeneous, un-exotic entity.

Unlike the mystical, timeless exoticism of *Stèles* that longs for a return to the past, *René Leys* acknowledges the present and its modernity, making one last attempt to catch the disappearing flicker of an imperial past that *Stèles* tried so frantically to re-create. *René Leys* and *Stèles* are similar in that both ancient China and the Imperial Palace of 1911 are equally inaccessible to Segalen except in his imagination. It is this impenetrability, of the past in the case of *Stèles* or the actual physical and cultural barriers in the case of *René Leys* that heightens the exotic because it preserves *le divers* from European influence.

Unlike Segalen's backward-looking works that re-created an ancient China-like world—while standing in for a more general, pre-modern state of greater human simplicity and value—*René Leys* is not about re-creating what has already been lost; it is about accessing a world that still exists but is forbidden. Because it is forbidden, according to Segalen's exoticism, it must necessarily be pure, exotic and a valid source of *le divers*. Beijing, wrote Segalen to his friend Henry Manceron, was still worth a discerning traveller's time, while the coast of China was like the outside of a half-rotten fruit: "Je reste violamment nostalgique pour Pékin. Crois-moi : méprise la côte. Oublie Shanghai et les ports du bas fleuve. La lisière de la Chine est «avancée»

comme une écorce meurtrie. Dedans, la pulpe est encore savoureuse” (Essai 52). If Beijing itself was still delicious, then inside the Forbidden City must have seemed truly ambrosial.

Pierre Loti, having helped set up a headquarters inside the annexed Imperial Palace during the Boxer Uprising, noted that, “Cette «Ville Impériale», pourtant, c’était un des derniers refuges de l’inconnu et du merveilleux sur terre, un des derniers boulevards des vieilles humanités, incompréhensible pour nous et presque un peu fabuleuses” (Loti). That Loti had been inside this last refuge only to pronounce it and its ancient civilization ‘incomprehensible’ must have been maddening for Segalen. As the narrator in *René Leys* remarks, “Mon grand regret reste d’être arrivé trop tard en Chine. Je coudoie tous les jours des gens qui, le temps d’une audience, sont entrés là, et ont pu l’apercevoir. Je doute, d’ailleurs, qu’ils aient su bien *voir*” (34). Instead, kept out, every visit becomes a siege, a desperate circling of the inviolable walls:

Et me voilà tournant juste le dos à l’Observatoire et au «coin sud-est», approchant au grand trot de mon but, la Ville impériale qui contient la Cité violette interdite—le «Dedans». Je vais pour la dixième fois l’assiéger, l’envelopper, tenter le contour exact, circuler comme le soleil au pied de ses murailles de l’est, de sud et de l’ouest, achever, si possible, le périple en m’en revenant par le Nord. (27).

Therefore, the ‘ville violette’ represents for Segalen the last frontier of a world untouched by modernity and the West. It only exists in its uncorrupted state *because* it is forbidden. For a European like Segalen to penetrate it would be to experience the shock of its difference (the ultimate exoticist moment) but would also make it no longer forbidden and therefore in danger of ceasing to exist. As intense as his desire was to experience this ultimate exoticist moment, was it so important to Segalen that he was willing to destroy this final bastion of diversity? By his obsessive desire to access the forbidden in the name of exoticism, Segalen finds himself in a paradoxical situation: he longs to be ‘Inside’, but to actually be ‘Inside’ would mean the eroding of the forbidden and therefore of its intrinsic exotic qualities.

He manages this paradox in several ways through *René Leys*. First, he allows himself to believe that he, as an *exote*, is in a class apart from his fellow Europeans: “il y a, parmi le monde, des voyageurs-nés; des *exotes*. Ceux-là reconnaîtront, sous la trahison froide ou sèche des phrases et des mots, ces inoubliables sursauts donnés par des moments tels que j’ai dit : le moment d’Exotisme” (Essai 24). When the narrator succeeds in entering the Palace, briefly, as a member of a French delegation, he notes the architecture, the dress of the palace attendants and marvels at the appearance of the Regent, “Lui, si peu «offensif»... comme il a l’air doux, et la

figure ronde sous le chapeau conique” (105). No sooner is the audience concluded, however, than the respectful narrator hears the comments of his fellow countrymen:

—Et regardez-moi ça! Cette espèce de tour qui à l’air d’une «bouteille de pippermint» —(ajoute un autre qui désigne le stupa blanc, la Tour hindoue si peu à son aise ici). Comme c’est chinois! Ça a l’air plein, est-ce pas? Eh! Bien, c’est creux à l’intérieur. Ça contient un Boudha de suif d’une religion inconnue!

J’affirme l’authenticité de ces paroles. Elles furent dites en cette circonstance par un capitaine du génie. Le suif est un mot sans doute mis pour «jade». Et le trait de «Boudha d’une religion inconnue» est fait de nacre : c’est la perle de mon sottisier chinois. (105)

In Segalen’s vision, the *exote*, because he knows how to truly see and appreciate, because he possesses a more in-depth knowledge of the exotic place and resists the temptation to compare all sights and sounds to his own culture, can be permitted inside the ‘forbidden’—not because his effect on the exotic world is less than the cruder, less aware ‘tourists’, but because the vision that he will extract is deemed more worthwhile. If the exotic is to disappear, let it disappear at the hand of those who can truly see. This is underlined by the fact that *René Leys* is set in the final months of the Qing: the downfall of the Empire is inevitable and this only intensifies the narrator’s desire to penetrate this disappearing world and catch one final glimpse of it, because his vision is worth the homogenization of the exotic that his European, outsider presence might contribute to.

Segalen also manages the inherent contradictions of the foreigner penetrating the forbidden by entering only in the realm of his imagination. Although the narrator of *René Leys* is named Victor Segalen and shares the author’s intense passion for Imperial China, it is clear that he is not meant to actually be Victor Segalen. So Victor Segalen the author is only imagining himself laying siege to the ‘ville violette’. In reality, the walls remain unassailed. Within the novel, the narrator too is also only accessing the Forbidden City through his imagination. And René Leys, who feeds the narrator’s imagination, also only penetrated the forbidden in his imagination, as his tales of love, friendship and police service to the imperial family were all a fabrication. Thus, while *René Leys* flirts, novelistically, with the possibility of trespass, in reality the young Belgian, the narrator and the author all remain expressly excluded from the forbidden palace. This imaginary trespass allows the author, through his self-inspired narrator and the tall tale-telling René Leys to live out his fantasies of the exotic, without either destroying the true exotic, or being forced to look back in time to an untouched version of an already destroyed exotic. The following passage illustrates the way the imagination works to satisfy the desire to

enter the Forbidden City: thanks to René Leys' description of the Regent's awkward, thumb-grasping handshake, "Je tiens la main du Régent dans la mienne, ou plutôt hors de la mienne. J'ai la face du Régent devant moi. Cet homme, gonflé d'importance imposée, officielle...je n'ai rien à savoir de plus. J'ai vécu vraiment, un instant de la vie la plus intime du Palais" (124). Similarly, the narrator presses René Leys for details about his intimate "audience" with the Empress Dowager and rejoices because:

je deviens spectateur de chacun des actes prévus. Je sais comment l'on s'étend sur le lit tiède, fait de briques creuses, adouci de coussins de soie...Grâce à lui, je pénètre véritablement le milieu le plus intime du Palais...C'est ainsi que j'apprends sans détours «qu'elle est moins grasse que ne la représentent ses portraits» —et que, même déshabillée, elle garde toujours ce «petit triangle de soie qui pend entre les seins et le ventre et forme une ceinture un peu haute, à la mode manchoue» (167)

In this way, Segalen allows himself, through his narrator-self, through René Leys' made-up stories, to penetrate the impenetrable, all the while leaving it untouched in reality.

In many ways, the contradictions that arise out of Segalen's extreme desire to be 'Inside' a world that is culturally forbidden him echo the contradictory nature of the exoticist project. The exoticist longed to be in a world whose difference and strangeness would shock and awaken the senses, yet all the while was aware that his presence in this strange world must ultimately change it and perhaps destroy it. The exoticist in Victor Segalen who crossed the earth in search of a place where he, a product of modernity, could live and experience a traditional, untouched world free from the sameness, alienation and spiritual emptiness of modernity could not accept that while he sought inspiration in the traditional, the people he encountered might be equally inspired by the modernity he had come to escape. Victor Segalen sought desperately to keep the untouched exotic world he imagined was—timelessly, perhaps—shut up inside the Forbidden City from the destruction of modernity. He could not accept that millions of Chinese were actively fighting to bring down the Qing. Hsieh points out that the final unraveling of René Leys' story and the narrator's loss of faith in his young friend's tales occurs at the moment of Yuan Shikai's arrival in Beijing. Neither René Leys nor the narrator saw Yuan Shikai as anything more than a minor political annoyance. With uprisings all along the Yangzi, and the south under the control of Sun Yatsen, René Leys merely quips, "Surtout ne parlez pas de «révolution». Ce sont des histoires de «rebelles»" (191). But as Hsieh explains

Yuan's arrival on the scene represents the intruding force of the Real. It is the sight of his triumphant entry into the capital which rocks the narrator's faith in his friend. Confronted with this piece of evidence, René Leys fails for the first time to provide a plausible explanation. The

Manchus have lost their political game, and the grocer's son who plays at being the Regent's friend and the Empress Dowager's lover forfeits his life in the debacle. (197)

When the Real, in the form of Yuan Shikai, becomes inescapable and negates the Imaginary, in the form of René Leys' and his stories, the only solution Segalen leaves his characters is poison, thereby excusing the master-storyteller René Leys from having to admit to his fabrications. There is no possibility of compromise, no hope in the novel of René Leys and the narrator accepting modernity for China. As Hsieh explains, "the novel reflects rather Segalen's inability to cope with the present, to embrace the hopes and aspirations of a nation rejecting its past and looking towards the future" (199).

*René Leys* is not only about Segalen's inability to accept the present, but also about the inability of the exoticist doctrine to which he subscribed—and of which he was the author—to make sense of the modern-day political realities that were a part of the exotic world: colonialism, imperialism, revolution, war and cultural hybridization. *René Leys* was Segalen's attempt to reconcile the exotic with the political reality of imperialism. While novelistically it is perhaps his best work, as an ideological project, it falls short. Like so much of the theory behind Segalen's *exotisme* that succeeds in defining the aesthetic only by what it is not, *René Leys* as an attempt to reconcile modernity and exoticism ends up being only about what could never be.

While Segalen's other works that remained comfortably anchored in the past show the artistic possibilities of exoticism, *René Leys* shows the failings of Segalen's exoticism: in its refusal to accept China's desire for change and modernity, Segalen's exoticism shows how clearly it is linked to imperialist ideology: the European, be he in the form of the money-grabbing colonial administrator or the Confucian-Classic-reading exoticist, knows what is best for the 'colony'. And what is best for the 'colony', ultimately, is what is best for the European. The Imperial system is the best government for China because it is the best form of government for Segalen, because it allows him to keep his dream of an exotic Other world.

## Conclusion

Victor Segalen was a visionary who was simultaneously ahead of his time and an anachronism. His entreaties to embrace diversity would have resounded with the multiculturalism, equity and globalization advocates of today; at the same time, his refusal to accept change in native, indigenous or post-colonial societies seems backward and oddly selfish.

However, Segalen lived in a different time, one where modernity and tradition existed side by side, but where the juggernaut of western civilization and imperialism had long been rolling across the earth, obliterating cultures, nations, societies and the possibilities they represented for the disenchanted European.

His writing attempted to capture these disappearing worlds, not as an anthropologist, recording the minute details of daily life, but as an artist, creating worlds that these real—but already lost—horizons represented, without relying on the stereotypes and clichés that had previously defined exotic writing. China, with a long and meticulously recorded history accessible to anyone willing to undertake the scholarship, presented an ideal opportunity to push back the narrowing horizons of the real world while remaining as authentic as possible.

If Segalen's exoticism seems naïve, idealistic and fraught with unresolved contradictions, perhaps it is not so much a product of Segalen's ideology, but of the simple fact that he died too young, without a chance to refine his ideas and leaving the bulk of his work to be cobbled together and published posthumously. Might Segalen have resolved the many contradictions inherent in an exoticism that was too precariously poised between the modern and the traditional, between the real and the imaginary?

Perhaps. As it stands, Segalen's biggest shortcoming, based on the unfinished, unrefined corpus that he left, was his inability to accept the China that fascinated and inspired him in its present-day modernity. Had he lived another two decades, he might have come across the writing of another western author with as deep an attachment to China as he had. Had he chanced upon one of the best-selling English-language novels of 1931, would Victor Segalen have discovered, on reading Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, that it was indeed possible to find the exotic in the daily life of ordinary Chinese people living in a changing world?

# Chapter Three: Yearning for the Good Earth

*How Pearl S. Buck's China Spoke to Depression-Era America*

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## Introduction

*Yellow Danger* author M.P. Shiel and Fu Manchu creator Sax Rohmer and were both unquestionably products of British imperialism, Kipling-like in their smug assuredness of the innate superiority of their own race and culture. Victor Segalen, with his mystical, timeless emperor-worship, was also influenced, if only partially, by his country's imperial doctrine.

Pearl S. Buck, however, the American daughter of Protestant missionaries who grew up in China and became its most emphatic western spokesperson, would have quaked with revulsion to even imagine a discourse wherein the words 'American' and 'imperialism' might appear. Convinced—despite her country's continued control of the Philippines—that US foreign policy was as benevolent as her own personal feelings, Pearl Buck is difficult to situate in a political context, even with the benefit of a century of hindsight.

Equally difficult to establish is the cultural context of Buck's writing. Was she American? Was she Chinese? Or a mere oddity of a cultural hybrid, the unhomely product of having to move between two very different worlds without ever feeling fully at home in either? Much has been written over the years about the political role of Buck's work. Buck herself believed she could be a cultural ambassador for China to her fellow Americans, while others have seen her novels as simplistic pleas for US intervention in Asia. Equally abundant is the literature describing Buck's unique position of cultural hybridity.

However, the literary context of Buck's career tells a different story. That *The Good Earth* became one of the best-selling novels of the 1930s and that the Swedish Academy deemed her work worthy of the Nobel Prize in 1937 were not simple accidents. Beyond the political ambitions that she claimed to have or that others ascribed to her work, beyond the conundrum of her nationality and cultural belonging, was the simple fact of the writing itself.

In this chapter, I propose to examine Pearl S. Buck's novels of China in the context of the relationship between Buck's writing and her audience. Her work touched readers in a way that transcended cultural boundaries, and abandoned the accepted literary division of 'us' and 'them' for a tale of universal truth. This was possible in part because of Buck's status as a cultural

hybrid, enabling her to see the universalities between two peoples by having lived among them, absorbing details, hearing ideas, stories and beliefs, and yet remaining an outsider in many ways.

The relationship between Buck's writing and her audience was based on two things. First, as will be discussed in the initial section, her novels, though about China, were very much a part of the distinct American populist literary tradition that flourished during the Depression but had its roots in Mark Twain and Jack London and produced Buck contemporaries such as John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck and was given voice by dust bowl troubadour Woody Guthrie. Second, Buck's work offered a Depression-Era audience a vision of an alternative Other world where the mythology of the American Dream—that prosperity is attainable by anyone and requires only hard work and dedication—would not fail them as it had failed them in 1930s America. In this, her portrayals of China incorporate many aspects of the exotic, despite being firmly rooted in American-style realism. As well, the powerful emotions and hopeful naïveté that Buck poured into her work give it a tone that is beautiful yet exotic, and her conflicting literary relationship with modernity also suggests an exoticist interpretation.

Buck's work has rarely been examined from an exoticist point of view; this may largely be due to the tendency to ascribe anthropological objectivity to her novels based on the bicultural nature of her life. Although Buck may not have intended to present China as exotic nor as an imagined Other world that existed as an alternative to dehumanizing modernity, progress and homogenizing westernization, it is remarkable how well her work fits into this genre.

### **Pearl S. Buck: A Complicated Literary Tradition**

In 1931, the year *The Good Earth* was published, Pearl S. Buck was living in Nanjing with her first husband John Lossing Buck and teaching at the University of Nanjing. In the decade leading up to that year, Buck had lived through the many tumultuous events of Republican China: she saw Chiang Kai-Shek lead the Northern Expedition; watched in frustration as the Nationalist preoccupation with fighting the Communists turned into a brutal civil war; narrowly escaped anti-foreign violence during the Nanjing incident in 1927, and in the very year her most well-known novel appeared on American bookshelves, the Japanese invaded Manchuria.

On the other side of the world, things were much different. Though they would never forget the horrors of the First World War, Americans in 1931 were free from the military strife and international conflict that plagued China. In America, a land not hardened to the cycle of



drought, famine and migration that had been a part of China's agricultural life for centuries, the combination of the dust bowl and the stock market crash was about to deliver a devastating blow to a country that had never before imagined the failure of the American Dream.

Although the Depression of the 1930s is often seen as one of the biggest financial and agricultural calamities of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America, in truth, agriculture did not suddenly collapse at the beginning of the decade in the way that the stock market did. As Conn points out, "the agricultural depression had begun in the 1920s, long before the Crash. Commencing in fact in the 1880s, the small family farm entered a decline that would continue through the twentieth century" (Conn, *American 1930s* 48). In much the same way that the small tradesman had been bankrupted by the advent of factories in Europe during the industrial revolution, the gradual mechanization of agriculture in the United States increased the gap between the large commercial farmers who could afford to mechanize and the family farmers who could not. As Robert Newton Peck made clear in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, his memoir of coming of age on a small Vermont farm in the late 1920s, the death of one working family member, the drying up of a single milk cow or the loss of an ox could ruin a family who farmed on a subsistence basis without mechanization. These subsistence farmers relied on loans from the local bank, borrowed to buy seed in the spring and repaid when their small surplus was sold in the fall. When the stock market collapsed, taking the banking industry with it, the fragile network of cyclical lending and borrowing fell apart. However, as Conn points out, this larger picture was not always obvious to the victims of the Depression, particularly those in subsistence agriculture:

As many contemporary observers pointed out, a commitment to self-reliance survived among countless men and women who continued to believe in the efficacy of initiative and hard work and considered poverty a proof of moral turpitude. Since up to a quarter of the work force was idled, such a belief could engender enormous emotional pain. (*American 1930s* 4).

Thus, by 1931, the simple life of the American subsistence farmer was less and less economically viable and was in the process of passing from the world of the real into the sphere of cultural mythology. In the American imagination, the family farm could still exist, could still function and hard work on the land could still keep a family alive. In reality, however, many small farmers were selling, going bankrupt or moving into the cities. In much the same way that writers and readers of exotic literature sought an exotic Other world where they could imagine a life free from the confines of modernity and the alienation of industrialization, those in America who had been let down by the American Dream looked for an Other world where the idyll of the

family farm might still exist and where hard work and determination must lead inevitably to success.

Suddenly, there began appearing in bookstores a novel about a hard-working man and his humble wife who farm a small plot of land with only the strength of their backs, an ox and a few tools. Through suffering, drought and famine they persevere, eventually attaining a prosperity that leads them toward greed and excess and away from the land. How wholly this tale would have resonated with those who still clung to the family farm, or those who looked back on their farming life from the discomfort of a cramped city dwelling—and resonate it did, for in the very year it was published it became an instant bestseller. The novel, of course, was Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* and it mattered little that it took place in an unnamed village in China, that its characters were Chinese, wore their hair in pigtails and took concubines. They were farmers nonetheless, and they ploughed and planted and harvested, lived through droughts and floods and felt joy clutching a handful of good, dark earth. It mattered little that the novel's author, having lived virtually all her life in China, had written about farmers on the other side of the world—to many Americans of 1931, *The Good Earth* might as well have been about them.

*The Good Earth* was published in 1931 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932. Immediately following the novel's initial surge of popularity, American bookshelves began to fill with similar novels—minus the Chinese location—set in a rural America populated by honest, hard-working men and women who weathered the small dramas of life while continuing on a tradition of farming or ranching, the details of which were woven into the text, much in the same way as they had been an integral part of *The Good Earth*. In 1932 and 1933, John Steinbeck published *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Red Pony*, and *To a God Unknown*. Although these did not achieve the popular success of *The Good Earth*, they were followed by the more widely-acclaimed *Of Mice and Men* in 1937 and *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. In 1934, Josephine Winslow Johnson won the Pulitzer Prize for her tale of a family's return to the land, *Now in November*. The best-selling novel of 1938 was Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' *The Yearling*, with its meticulous descriptions of rural Florida and in the same decade, Laura Ingalls Wilder began publishing the *Little House on the Prairie* books. *The Good Earth*, though written about China, in China and by an American who had lived almost exclusively on Chinese soil, fits almost perfectly into this genre of reminiscent pastoral literature, and Buck's tale came to Americans exactly when they needed it most.

Much of Pearl S. Buck's writing fits just as closely into similar Depression-era literary trends. While tales of simple, hard-working farmers enchanted readers of the 1930s, many authors—in some cases the same ones who produced the idyllic pastoral novels—also sought to chronicle the hardships of the people to whom this life was now lost. Common themes included strikes and labour struggles, emancipation of women and blacks, tales of the urban down-and-out and stories of the after-effects of war. Novels of this type included John Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy, Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and *In Dubious Battle*. Standing as perhaps the quintessential novel of the 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath* succeeded in connecting the two popular Depression-era themes of rural life and labour struggle. As *The Good Earth* fits in with the pastoral fable, many of Buck's other novels can be seen as a part of the 1930s 'novel of social unrest' trend. *East Wind, West Wind* addresses questions of women's liberation in a Chinese context, while the subtle and cooperative resistance of one small town to the Japanese invasion in *Dragon Seed* reads much like *In Dubious Battle* and other strike and labour novels.

Richard So even goes so far as to describe *The Good Earth* as "Buck's attempt to write a novel about 1930s America in the context of China" (97). In this analysis, which he attributes in part to Karen Leong, Buck sought to "universalize the idea of class struggle across the Pacific and at the same time to produce sympathetic analogies between American and Chinese working classes by 'Americanizing' the Chinese peasant figure". He contends that "the popularity of *The Good Earth* thus consisted of its reimagining of 1930s American poverty as a universal global condition, a literary rendering that deeply moved and resonated with US readers during the Depression" (97). Yet, while *The Good Earth* certainly owes its popularity to the way American audiences received it during the Depression, it was not Buck's hand that purposely wrote that connection into the novel. She did not simply clothe an American farmer in Chinese garb in order to broadcast a message of class struggle and hope. She portrayed the Chinese peasant as she saw him, without prejudice and therefore more universal than previous literary representations of Chinese. The connection between Chinese peasant and American farmer was one of simple timing. Buck's readers made the connection because in Wang Lung, they recognized their struggling selves.

In fact, Buck admits that she initially failed to recognize the severity of the Depression in the United States. Upon her return in 1932, she claims, she did not even notice the crisis. Later, a

friend asked, “Do you not remember the men on the streets selling apples? Do you not recall the beggars?” Buck explains that,

The fact is I had always lived where beggars were an accepted group in society...and so I did not notice the beggars on the streets of New York, except to marvel how few they were. Had the great rich city been in China or India, the beggars would have been many times more. And I was used all my life to seeing vendors selling small stores of fruit on the streets of any city and so I did not notice the few apple peddlers in New York that year. (My Several Worlds 273)

We can therefore conclude that Pearl S. Buck did not write *The Good Earth* specifically with an American audience and its economic suffering in mind. Nor was the fable of hard work, suffering and simplicity a strictly American fantasy. For Buck, the novel was deeply rooted in memory and represented a world that had been lost to her, much as the notion of the family farm had been lost to 1920s and 1930s America. When she wrote the novel, she was living in Nanjing under an unstable government and subject to regular episodes of anti-foreign violence. Previously, the couple had been in rural northern China, a time and place Buck remembered as happy and peaceful. Change, be it as a result of the couple’s move to Nanjing, or a consequence of the greater upheavals in the Chinese social and political fabric, effectively rendered the happy, simple North China world as out of reach as the family farm was to the American farmer. *The Good Earth*, therefore, is as much nostalgic memory for Buck as it is a depiction of a world experienced first-hand.

In reality, however, in Nationalist China the peasant was still very much in existence, although the idea that he lived so close to the earth that his only source of misery came from that earth—as *The Good Earth* suggests—was difficult for Chinese intellectuals of the time to accept. Chinese literary critic Hu Feng, drawing on the Marxist rhetoric that was gaining credence at the time, claimed that Buck’s portrayal overlooked many of the factors contributing to rural poverty. As Choi Won-Shik explains,

First, the economic situation of the rural community is handled too vaguely. After all, the land that is part of the feudal oppression is simply called the “good earth” and the novel falls into a simple glorification of the earth and labor. Second, Pearl Buck, as a novelist, lacks a good grasp of the poor peasants’ fate. She confined natural disasters as the sole factor influencing the peasant life. She also attributed people’s negligence as the reason for the appearance of bandits. Third, the imperialist structure that destroyed the Chinese countryside is absent. “After the Boxer Rising (1900), as the church grew in power daily, there was conflict between the peasants and the church and between believers and unbelievers.” Hu suggested that Buck purposefully shuts her eyes to these facts and exaggerates Wang Lung family’s ignorance about Christianity. (Choi 146)

Therefore, while American audiences fell in love with *The Good Earth* and other novels celebrating pastoral simplicity, at least some Chinese critics and readers expected something

more revolutionary that would bring into greater focus the social and political forces that perpetuated the misery of the peasant existence in the context of modernity, rather than simplifying it and glorifying that simplicity. While Chinese authors such as Lu Xun and Ba Jin, both of whom Buck praises enthusiastically for the newness and revolutionary nature of their writing, were exploring issues of urban life and modernity, Buck's sense of nostalgia set her apart as much as her nationality. It is this nostalgia that brings her closer to her American contemporaries than to Chinese authors and critics.

Buck occupied a unique position: she was white, American and the daughter of missionaries; she also spent her entire childhood in China, spoke Chinese, was taught by a Chinese tutor and possessed the gift of insatiable curiosity about all people with whom she interacted. This gave her work an authority that other Euro-American authors writing about China lacked. Before *The Good Earth*, the American reading public had largely overlooked the simple, everyday life of the Chinese peasant in favour of more exoticized constructs such as the unassimilable Chinatown heathen, the opium fiend, the devious criminal mastermind or the bloodthirsty barbarian. For Pearl Buck, these constructs were not part of the China she knew; certainly, there were opium addicts, criminals and many Chinese were uninterested in Christianity; Buck herself had lived through the horror of the Boxer Rebellion and knew that cruelty and violence could be found in China, just as they could be found anywhere else. But millions of Chinese peasants never fit those over-inflated stereotypes, and it was Pearl Buck who offered Americans the first alternative depiction of the Chinese. According to Chinese critic Kang Liao,

Pearl Buck wrote a novel about genuine Chinese peasants and farmers in China to describe so realistically how they lived, how they loved, how they toiled, how they thrived, how they suffered, and how they endured that for the first time in history the majority of Western readers saw the majority of the Chinese as they were. *The Good Earth* broke down many of the racial prejudices and thus improved the American image of the Chinese (65).

That Buck's literature altered Americans' perceptions of China is uncontested. However, many have inscribed into this simple cause and effect relationship a politically driven mission in Buck's literature, insisting that she wrote many of her novels in order to sway popular opinion towards a specific foreign-relations end. The truth, however, is that although Buck followed politics and spoke out regularly, much of her activism was inspired by emotion and not by explicit, clearly-defined political motives. Because of her ability to see an issue from several

different angles, many of the political opinions she expressed in her 1954 autobiography *My Several Worlds* seem contradictory and naïve. She believed that American-style democracy was the answer to China's troubles, yet she also believed that the Imperial system had worked, and Sun Yatsen had been too hasty in dismantling it. She enthusiastically supported the May Fourth activists in their efforts to free China from the Confucian family system, and yet when she saw the number of uncared-for elderly and orphans in the United States, she decided that the family system was preferable to a bureaucracy of social workers. She deplored the attitudes of missionaries and traders in China "all white men indeed, who considered themselves whether consciously or unconsciously superior to the Chinese" (*My Several Worlds* 48) and yet believed that a special "American spirit" gave her country "our own amazing ability to aid in fulfilling" the needs of humanity, while holding "our allies, not by force of arms and government, but by mutual benefit and friendship" (*My Several Worlds* 407). In short, Buck's politics revolved around a naïve belief that all Americans were as caring, helpful and free from corruption as she believed herself to be. Rather than subscribing to specific political goals, Buck promoted a form of global brotherhood that involved mutual understanding between nations and erased racial discrimination at home. Wang notes that Buck

thought that simple ignorance, combined with immaturity, kept Americans from understanding their proper role. She meant to correct the deficiencies through her writing, her prominence, and her public speaking. She worked through organizations, such as the East and West Association, and through publishing ventures with Richard Walsh, especially the John Day Company and the magazine *Asia and the Americas*. (3)

This form of internationalism, however, with its desire to 'help' other nations become more democratic, more modern, more educated and less patriarchal, can be seen as merely another form of expansionism, couched in benign terms of understanding and love. Although the desire to help was genuine, beneath it was a firm belief in American manifest destiny and the cultural and racial hierarchy that was one of its basic assumptions. A nation that needed help was inherently inferior to the nation that offered the help, and while this discourse of inferiority-superiority rarely appears in Buck's writing, it is clear the unique "American spirit" of which she was fiercely proud could only exist in this context.

During Buck's lifetime, she was regarded by her fellow countrymen as a 'China expert'. Politicians sought her advice and many Americans subscribed to her belief that the United States might have 'saved' China from communism. Without question, her writing was responsible for

an increased awareness of Chinese culture and a greater acceptance of racial and ethnic difference, both at home and abroad. Buck's writing was intended as testimony of the pure and benevolent humanism, internationalism and global brotherhood that Buck fervently believed in. However, just like Victor Segalen's well-meaning and in-depth explorations of the Chinese imperial past, Buck cannot truly be separated from the form of imperialism under which she laboured. By seeing Americans as 'special' and endowed with a special 'American spirit' and superior form of government, she creates an opposition where the Other (in this case the Chinese) who is not blessed with American democracy—the superior American democracy which might have “prevented” Chinese communism (Buck, *My Several Worlds* 380)—who is seen as backwardly patriarchal and in need of outside help, leadership and friendship becomes a child-like, less advanced and inferior people, despite her efforts to promote the same Other as an equal.

Although the opposition between those-who-need-help and those-who-should-help is clear in Buck's memoirs, letters and speeches, it does not always appear in her novels, in part because few of these include non-Chinese characters and do not generally discuss politics. This difference between Buck's literary China and the China of her political analyses is also due to the fact that the China of *The Good Earth*, *East Wind, West Wind* and *Dragon Seed* is not wholly real; it is an exotic vision of a world free from the ravages of modernity, where simplicity and hard work are still valued. It is a literary, exotic imagining. In the following section, I will examine several of Buck's novels as exoticist representations. This treatment will lead into a discussion of Buck's ambivalent portrayals of modernity, an ambivalence that sets her apart from more backward-yearning exotic writers such as Segalen.

### **Pearl Buck's Exotic China**

The picture—black and white, taken over a century ago—shows a man and a boy from behind. They wear long silk robes, cork-soled cloth shoes and cloth caps. A braid hangs from the back of their heads, falling all the way to the backs of their knees. Above the steps on which they stand hang two fat lanterns decorated with Chinese writing. Painted on the side of the concrete railing to the left of them is a sign in Chinese for a basement opium room. The man and the boy could be standing in the bright early-morning sun of a street in turn-of-the-century Shanghai, Nanjing or Guangzhou, but they are not. They are in San Francisco.

The photographer was Arnold Genthe, a young German. While travelling in the United States as a tutor, he happened to read a guidebook that warned visitors to avoid San Francisco's

Chinese Quarter. Intrigued, he made a point of visiting it upon his arrival in 1895. He was so fascinated by the world he found within those ten blocks that he took up photography in order to show this mysterious and exotic place to his family in the old country.

To an American in 19<sup>th</sup>-century California, the man and the boy in the photograph with their long robes and braids appeared just as foreign as they did to Arnold Genthe; these were not the raggedy Irish or the serious and sullen Germans who were pouring into America through Ellis Island. These people looked different, spoke differently, worshipped completely different gods, and they were coming directly into California from across the Pacific. Their social structure was incomprehensible; the food and wares in their markets were unrecognizable. They were exotic, in much the same way that Sax Rohmer's menagerie assortment of half-human 'oriental' villains were exotic: they were different at a time when, as Spencer points out, "difference was still a sign of deviance, and Western cultural practices were considered to be the norm" (Spencer). This perceived deviance fed the idea of a Chinese underworld of opium dens, secret societies and moral corruption. This underworld grew from its reality—ten or so blocks within a city's least desirable area that housed its least welcome labourers—to its exotic, imaginary construct: an area where squalour and foreignness concealed unspeakable vice and hid criminal masterminds of unimaginable genius. The Euro-American was naturally drawn to this imagined Chinatown: its supposed immorality gave him something against which to compare his notion of Self, thereby reinforcing the assumed superiority of his race. It also provided him an imaginary Other world where, feeling oppressed by the rigid structure of his own society, he could 'get away with' things that were unacceptable in his own world, or experiment with things that were taboo, by simply living vicariously through tales and stories of this deviant world. Thus, in the United States, from the days before the Exclusion Act right up to the publication of *The Good Earth*, tales of mysterious Chinatowns, opium dens, prostitution and secret societies enthralled American readers. When they opened the pages of *The Good Earth* for the first time, American readers already had a well-developed notion of the exotic Chinese literary figure.

Wang Lung and O-Lan, readers quickly discovered, were so far from this exotic stereotype that, as a 1931 *New York Times* review notes "One tends to forget, after the first few pages, that the persons of the story are Chinese and hence foreign" (Spencer). However, while the characters were simple, down-to-earth people, the novel itself was nonetheless a work of exotic fiction in the sense of Chris Bongie's conception of exotic literature: it created an Other



world “outside or beyond the confines of ‘civilization’ that, by virtue of its modernity, was perceived by many writers as being incompatible with certain essential values—or indeed, the realm of value itself” (Bongie 5).

This section of the thesis will examine *The Good Earth* and several other works by Pearl S. Buck as works of exotic fiction. I will contrast Buck’s very different exoticism with the Chinatown fantasies that preceded her, highlighting the role her literature played in changing those deeply-held prejudices. I will continue with an analysis of Buck’s unique form of exoticism and outline the contradictions that exist in her work between her idealistic world and a modernity that, unlike other exoticist writers, she could not wholly reject.

Unlike the beautiful, wise emperors of Victor Segalen’s China, who existed in a fantasy world loosely based on a China far from his native France, Chinese immigrants had been living and working in America for decades. They had brought their puzzling customs with them and erected mysterious Chinatowns wherever they settled. Today, it is difficult to imagine just how thoroughly foreign the Chinese might have seemed to a white labourer in the American West. Arnold Genthe’s photographs only hint at the degree of Otherness that they would have embodied.

The China of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, part of that fantastical conglomerate known as ‘the Orient’, was more imagined than concrete for the Europeans and Euro-Americans to whom the ‘exotic Oriental’ stood in stark contrast to their idea of rational, civilized, white self. As Rousseau and Porter explain, the exotic, “whatever lies beyond the horizon of our mental maps of the familiar, conjuring up fascination and terror alike, acquires the attributes of difference, and thereby, of course, serves to reinforce the comforting perception of our own good order and sweet reasonableness” (4). The notion of ‘exotic’ generally presupposes a certain geographical distance, and it is partly this distance that made Segalen’s beneficent, all-knowing, timeless emperors so non-threatening to the European perception of Self. However, when the element of geographical separation is removed and the exotic Other begins living, working and settling in amongst those for whom he was a mere construct, suddenly he becomes threatening. When, in addition, the exotic Other begins arriving by the thousands, the construct that conjured “up fascination and terror alike” (Rousseau and Porter 4) also inspires fear and resentment.

Out of this fear and resentment sprang a vast collection of Chinatown pulp fiction recounting Yellow Peril-style invasions, or set in a criminal underworld vision of Chinatown.

Chinese in these tales were either inhumanly evil or abysmally stupid and naïve. If they were women, they were desperately in need of rescue. These Chinese, generally referred to by the derogatory epithet ‘Chinaman’ were exoticized constructs, alluring to readers for the world of danger they could access through them. There was none of the reverence of Segalen’s poetry, and little longing for a distant, idealized China. And yet, struggling to reconcile themselves to a modernity that had erased the possibility of the subsistence farm and turned the treasured American Dream into a cutthroat competition that left thousands starving and homeless, Americans still longed for an exotic Other world where they could imagine their lives carrying on in an idyllic, pre-modern simplicity. For many, Pearl Buck’s China became this Other world—a down-to-earth place peopled by characters whose customs suddenly seemed quaint and endearing rather than terrifying and sinister.

In the classic exotic literature that Victor Segalen condemned, writers created a sense of exoticism and difference through descriptions of the Other world’s geography, imbuing the flora, fauna, beaches, forests and villages of distant lands with a mysterious reverence. Thus, the palm trees, coconuts, yellow suns and rolling seas that Segalen abhorred. However, despite his criticism, a strong sense of place was integral to exotic literature, and whether the writer achieved this through cliché markers such as palm trees or through more authentic descriptions mattered little.

In *The Good Earth*, *Dragon Seed* and many other of Buck’s novels the notion of ‘the land’ creates this sense of exotic place. The land itself becomes holy and revered, near-magical in that out of a sacred black earth can spring all the joys and sorrows of human life. When O-lan comes to join Wang Lung in the field for the first time, their work unites them and ties them to past and future generations. Buck’s description of this is distinctly spiritual:

There was only the perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. The earth lay rich and dark, and fell apart lightly under the points of their hoes. Sometimes they turned up a bit of brick, a splinter of wood. It was nothing. Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone back into earth. So would also their house, sometime, return into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth. (31)

In *Dragon Seed*, Ling Tan shows a similar reverence to the land, combining ancestor veneration with a geological and archaeological precision that highlights the importance of the land that sustains his family:

He had once in his youth dug a well for his father and for the first time he had seen what lay under their fields. First there was the deep thick crust of the earth, fertile and loose with the tilling of his forefathers and with their waste which they poured back into it year after year. This earth was so rich that almost it was quick enough to spring into life of its own accord. Fed for growing and nurtured for harvest, it lay hungry for seed as a woman is, eager to be about its business.

This earth he knew. But under it was a hard yellow bottom of clay, as tightly packed as the bottom of a pan. How did that yellow bottom come there? He did not know nor did his father, but there it lay to catch and hold the rain for the roots that needed it. And beneath that yellow clay was a bed of rock, not solid, but splintered and split into thin pieces, and between these was grayish sand. And under this bed was still another, strangest of all, for here were pieces of tile and scraps of blue pottery and when Ling Tan dug the well, he even found an old silver coin of a sort he had never seen before and then a broken white pottery bowl and at last a deep brown jar, glazed and whole and full of a gray dust. He had taken these things to his father, and father and son they had looked at them. "These were used by those from whom we sprang," his father had said. "Let us put them into the tombs with your grandparents." So they had done, and then Ling Tan went on digging and out of those depths clear water spouted forth one morning like a fountain, and never to this day had the well failed. (Buck, *Dragon Seed*)

To American readers, this description from *Dragon Seed*, published in 1942, would have inspired more than the simple sense of awe and beauty that it does today. In 1942, the memory of the Dust Bowl, where the topsoil—"the deep thick crust of the earth, fertile and loose with the tilling of his forefathers"—of much of America's farming land had dried up and blown away was still a recent and painful memory. This description of the earth of Ling Tan's farm, with its perfect, fertile topsoil, would have seemed a description of paradise.

Throughout *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung cherishes this notion of land. A good harvest brings wealth, which Wang Lung invariably reinvests in more land. During the famine, he refuses to see himself as one of the beggars, the "scum which clung to the walls of a rich man's house" (129) because he has land to which he will eventually return. Owning land gives him a dignity that even poverty cannot take away. By the end of the novel, having succumbed to excess, he longs "to walk out on his land and feel the good earth under his feet and take off his shoes and his stockings and feel it on his skin" (365), but is too ashamed, being by then a well-off landowner. The land, and Wang Lung's life on it, his enrichment through it and eventual estrangement from it, becomes the story itself.

And yet this land, which might otherwise be a universal construct, is tempered by detailed descriptions of the specific cycles of its cultivation, the people who work it, their rituals and their hardships. Thus, the notion of 'the land' is both a universal concept, recognizable to any person who ekes a living out of a similar piece of earth, and a distinctly place-anchored concept. Readers are at once aware that this sacred land is both universal and distinctly Chinese,

making it something they know, but, being distant and of an Other world, cannot attain except in the realm of the imagination.

This transformation of ‘the land’ into an exotic Other world is accompanied by a similar exoticizing of daily life. *The Good Earth* opens with the meticulous description of Wang Lung’s bath—beginning with his kindling the fire and heating the water—then recounts his visit to the Street of the Barbers, describes the pork and beancurd and fish he buys, and tells how he and his new wife burn incense to the earthen gods with their red gilt paper clothes and hair mustaches. This mixing of the quotidian, the earth and the sacred can be seen in the following passage about Wang Lung and O-lan’s visit to the village temple:

Within the temple snugly under the roof sat two small, solemn figures, earthen, for they were formed from the earth of the fields about the temple. These were the god himself and his lady. They wore robes of red gilt paper, and the god had a scant, drooping moustache of real hair. Each year at the New Year Wang Lung’s father bought sheets of red paper and carefully cut and pasted new robes for the pair. And each year rain and snow beat in and the sun of summer shone in and spoiled their robes. (22)

Like all anti-modern exotic writing, Buck’s early novels glorify a simpler, less confusing and more human existence. In this exotic world, the politics and revolutions of modernity are distant and blurred out. As Conn points out, “All around him, Wang Lung hears talk of revolution, but it is a word he has never heard and does not understand. As far as he can tell, the enemy is not the Emperor, or the economic system or Confucianism or any abstract idea or ideology. The enemy is drought, an unfriendly fate, and bad luck” (PSB: Cultural Biography 125). This sensation of a distant world untouched by modern politics is heightened by Buck’s opaquing of geographical and temporal specifics. The sentence in *The Good Earth* “In Anhwei, where Wang Lung was born, the language is slow and deep and it wells from the throat. But in the Kiangsu city where they now lived, the people spoke in syllables which splintered from their lips” (113) provides the only definite place names in the entire novel. Elsewhere, these two places are merely referred to as ‘the southern city’ or ‘the northern town’. Even in *Dragon Seed*, where the fact of the Japanese invasion is clearly stated, places and things remain similarly nameless. When Lao Er and Jade leave for the unoccupied regions of China, this area is simply called ‘the west’. Rather than speak of bombs, Buck describes them instead as “great thunders of noise” and “the thing that burst in his neighbor’s field” (Buck, *Dragon Seed*).

This deliberate blurring of geographical specifics gives Buck’s writing a sense of unreality, creating a world that easily lends itself to exotic imagining. Adding to this sense of the

distant and exotic is the fact that many of the details regarding her characters' beliefs and rituals—while likely based on actual observations by Buck—cast the Chinese Other as naïve and childlike, a characterization commonly found in exoticist portrayals of the Other, as this passage about an eclipse demonstrates:

For that there was enmity between sun and moon in the sky everybody knew. Two or three times in his lifetime this enmity had blazed into battle and sun would try to swallow moon or moon would swallow sun, and then everywhere people were frightened and shouted and cried and screamed into the sky and beat gongs and hollow drums and empty rice cauldrons or whatever they had at hand to make a noise. After the noise grew great enough the sun and moon would give heed to it and slowly they drew apart and went back to their own ways again. But if they had not heard the commotion from the earth, they would have fought until one had downed the other somehow, and then half the light from heaven would have perished, and worse if the sun had lost and been swallowed by the moon. (Buck, *Dragon Seed*)

In Bongie's vision of exoticism, modernity is either completely absent from the entire world depicted in a text, or it appears as a negative influence, the cause of the idyllic world's collapse, the characters' corruption, or a source of evil. Often, Buck presents a similar vision of modernity, where modern ideas are a threat to the balance of the characters' simple lives. When Wang Lung goes to the barber for a shave on his wedding day, the barber asks if he would like him to take off his braid. When Wang Lung replies, alarmed, “ ‘I cannot cut it off without asking my father!’ ”, the barbers laugh at him for being so backward (TGE 11). In *Dragon Seed*, the villagers who resist the enemy by simply refusing to leave and “holding the land” are portrayed as stoic, while Ling Tan's sons become inhuman, bloodthirsty killers after acquiring modern, foreign guns.

However, while Buck's exoticism certainly did offer her readers a vision of an Other world and a simpler life that was closer to the earth and free from the soul-destroying forces of modernity, her work also displays a reluctance to completely cast off all things modern. Although Buck's novels are an exaltation of an already lost pastoral life, Buck cannot, in the way that Segalen could, completely reject modernity. In this, Buck's lived experience often trumped her aesthetic sense. As much as modernity brought dislocation, change and disempowerment, modernity could also bring a better life—and, in the case of modern medicine, life itself.

Victor Segalen's work was driven by ideology. His writing followed the strict aesthetic guidelines that he set out in his definition of exoticism and could not include any element of the modern that might destroy his vision of a timeless, imperial China. Pearl Buck, in contrast, was driven by emotion and, as such, her work does not follow similarly strict aesthetic guidelines but

wavers between the pastoral and the modern. The happiness she felt recalling her life in the northern village where she lived in her early adult years resulted in a work that presented all the trappings of the exotic. In her writing, she attempted to capture that happiness and simplicity, keeping it alive as an alternative imaginary world when her real life had moved on. At the same time, the emotion she felt seeing the pain and suffering of others—particularly where children were involved—resulted in a vision of an exotic world that does not wholly reject modernity but rather welcomes it where it promises an end to suffering.

Buck's vision of China and her acceptance of the modern into her otherwise pastoral writing was shaped by memories such as the one below:

But the voice I remember most clearly is the cry of a Chinese woman, a mother, any mother whose child was dying, his soul wandering away from home, she thought, and so she seized the child's little coat and lit a lantern and ran out into the street, calling the wailing pitiful cry, "Sha-lai, sha-lai!" and this meant "Child, come back, come back!" How often have I heard that cry, and always with a pang of the heart! Lying in my comfortable bed and safe under our own roof, I could see too vividly the stricken family and the little child lying dead or dying and all the calling in the world could never bring his soul back home again. (Buck, *My Several Worlds* 73).

While the pitiful cry of the Chinese mother could never bring that child's soul home, Western medicine could. Tetanus vaccines, proper hygiene and surgical intervention in childbirth could prevent the loss of other children. Women who could read could access information about infection, hygiene, disease and malnutrition. Modernity, therefore, when it meant fewer babies dying, women learning to read, unbinding their feet, or young couples marrying for love, was welcome in her narrative world. Unlike the late 19<sup>th</sup> century writers that are the subject of Bongie's study, Buck did not suffer the same anxiety about the modern world, where "everywhere and in everything, this modernity cancels out whatever might once have differed from it, reducing both the earth and those who inhabit it to a single common denominator" (Bongie 149). For Buck, however, the pre-modern was beautiful and spiritual, but modernity could also bring salvation.

In Buck's first novel, *East Wind, West Wind*, the desirable elements of modernity such as western medicine, free choice in marriage, and equality between women and men are set alongside the traditions of Chinese family life such as arranged marriage and Confucian deference of younger to older and women to men. Kwei-lan, a traditionally-raised young woman, marries her Western-educated husband only to discover that he wishes her to become more modern. At the same time, Kwei-lan's brother returns from America with an American wife.

Kwei-lan grudgingly embraces modernity in order to please her husband, and struggles with her mother's refusal to accept her brother's foreign wife. With the death of her mother and the birth of a son for each couple, the young people hope to find a bridge between the traditions of their world and the new ideals of modernity on which they have based their life choices. Throughout the novel, as the four young people explore modernity and stoically take on the suffering that comes with opposing tradition and family, Buck maintains an aura of reverence towards the timeless exotic China out of which her modern characters emerge. When Kwei-lan's father refuses to admit the son of her brother and his American wife into the family, Kwei-lan remains conflicted. She feels the rightness of her brother's love for his wife, yet finds it difficult to question the Confucian doctrine:

Ah, we learned in the Sacred Edicts when we were only little children even, that a man must not love his wife more than his parents. It is a sin before the ancestral tablets and the gods. But what weak human heart can stem the flowing of love into it? Love rushes in, whether the heart will have it or not. How is it that the ancients in all their wisdom never knew this? I cannot reproach my brother any more. (260)

Pearl Buck's portrayal of a China conflicted by its young people's desire for modernization was not only inspired by her own ardent desire to help end the suffering she witnessed, but also from her great respect and enthusiasm for the May Fourth authors. However, while the China that backgrounded Lu Xun's stories had been corrupt, backward and dangerously dependent on superstition, the traditional China Buck presents is generally one of beauty and wisdom, merely in need of modernizing in certain areas. In this way, even a novel with a clearly modernist agenda such as *East Wind, West Wind* remains powerfully exotic.

Although later novels featured more maturely-developed characters, those in *East Wind, West Wind*, particularly the women, are classically—if unintentionally—exoticized. The voice of the first-person narrator Kwei-lan is naïve and foreign-sounding; her ignorance—as Western readers would have perceived it—renders her as an exotic Other: silent, submissive, inferior, and in need of rescue.

While the exotic oriental damsel-in-distress trope was a common western fantasy, Leong argues that it was also an integral part of the missionary discourse:

Missionaries to China extended America's "informal empire" to Asia, whether they consciously intended to or not. American perceptions of China necessarily intersected with Americans' belief in their manifest destiny. American missionaries prided themselves on protecting Chinese women from the abuses of an archaic and patriarchal culture. By viewing itself as a moral and political guardian of weaker countries like China, America could justify a "more humane" and in fact "necessary" form of global expansion. (11)

According to this analysis, Buck, particularly in her first novel, is torn between an attempt to offer an accurate representation of China, and the deeply-ingrained missionary impulse to help and solicit help on behalf of a foreign Other who, by virtue of being in need of help, can only be seen as inferior, less enlightened, and less capable. Later novels shed this trope little by little as Buck's writing and political awareness become more mature. *The Good Earth's* O-lan is far from an exotic beauty; and though she still suffers in silence, she also embodies a personal strength that American readers might not have recognized in themselves, thus presenting her as both in need of help but superior to her potential saviours. In *Dragon Seed* the villagers are not portrayed as beautiful, stoic creatures calmly awaiting rescue from a more capable group to whom they will be forever grateful; instead they are brutalized and raped and rather than suffering patiently, they either fight back, give up, turn against one another, cooperate with the enemy, or flee. They do not wait silently to be saved, but demand why no other country steps in to help:

If there were a little hope somewhere in the sky," he told his second son one day. "If we saw hope as large as a man's hand even, raised to help us, but there is none who will help us. Everywhere in the world men think only of themselves." For by now even such men as he knew that none of the countries in the world had come forward to stand at their side or to give them aid in this desperate war, and he and all his fellows had heard that even in countries which called themselves friendly, men sold weapons and goods of war to the enemy for the price that they could get, and he and others like him were sore at heart because righteousness was not to be found any more among men. (Buck, *Dragon Seed*)

While Pearl Buck poured her life experiences and her hopes and dreams for China into her novels, to her American, Depression-era audience, the distant world where the land still gave and took away in a manner so attuned to the biological rhythms and cycles of the earth could hardly be seen as anything but exotic. Her characters—naïve, foreign-sounding and in need of rescue, yet awe-inspiringly stoic—could only be seen as Others. And yet, instead of establishing a distance between Self and Other, Buck's unique exoticism offered a rapprochement, a bridge between the divisive notions of 'us' and 'them' that had resulted in fear and hatred and engendered a literature built on the premise of a Yellow Peril.

Pearl Buck, Chinese critic Kang Liao claims, "was to the Chinese much more than what Harriet Beecher Stowe was to the black slaves" (81), in that she defused the idea of a Yellow Peril threat and gave the faceless hordes of 'Chinamen' names and stories, hopes and dreams and dignity. Her writing, though exotic, did not use the Other to define the Self, but showed how close Self and Other truly were, by virtue of their shared humanity.



## Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest tragedy in mid-twentieth century American literature was that one of its most eloquent authors was overshadowed by the jealousy and dismissal of her fellow writers. Pearl S. Buck was too prolific and too naïve, her critics and fellow—almost exclusively male—American authors claimed, and did not deserve the Nobel Prize. As Carolyn See quips, “As soon as she won the Nobel, it became clear to William Faulkner, for instance, that the Nobel wasn't worth getting. (As soon as he got it, of course, it became worth getting again)” (See). Others insisted her writing had become a mere vehicle for her humanitarianism, and still others aimed their criticism directly at her personal life and the operations of her many charitable organizations.

At the same time, America was changing. Pearl S. Buck's sincere and frankly beautiful writing had preached a new global brotherhood and called for an embracing of all people and their diversity. Sadly, just as her American audience was beginning to welcome this new form of multiculturalism, Buck's ideas were swept away by the close-mindedness of the McCarthy era. At the same time as the literary community was dismissing her for being too prolific, political ideology in the country was swinging rapidly to the right. In 1949, when potential ally China was ‘lost’ to communism, and all left-wing thinkers were suspected of being communist infiltrators, Pearl Buck's hopeful brotherhood between the United States and Asia fell quickly out of fashion. As she sadly reflected in her 1954 memoir:

Had I been able to foresee the strange atmosphere that has pervaded my country since 1946, where good men and true scholars have lost their jobs and their reputations because of their knowledge and their understanding of the areas which, without American leadership, have gone over to Communism, I should have been confirmed in my decision [to close *Asia* magazine and the East and West Association in 1946]. For though the East and West Association never sent a Communist or political figure to any American community, yet today it is dangerous even to declare belief in the brotherhood of people, in the equality of the races, in the necessity for human understanding, in the common sense of peace—all those principles in which I have been reared, in which I do believe and must believe fearlessly until I die. (*My Several Worlds* 376).

In China, the critical disapproval of her work in the 1930s became official condemnation under Mao: like so many others, Buck was a running dog of capitalism, the Chinese authorities claimed, and her work was only meant to show China in an unfavourable light. Even when the 1971 Ping Pong Diplomacy brought the grudging rapprochement between China and the United States, Pearl Buck remained unwelcome. In response to her many requests to be permitted to visit China, a State Official replied that in her works she had “taken an attitude of distortion,

smear, and vilification towards the people of new China and its leaders” (Melvin 25), and consequently would not be permitted to visit.

With her death in 1973, she slid further into oblivion. Her charitable foundations continued their work, while her children squabbled publicly over inheritance and legacy. But few read Pearl Buck anymore. Her name rarely appeared on lists of great American authors. She had been read and admired together with John Steinbeck, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Laura Ingalls Wilder, had touched Depression-era America in the same way Steinbeck, Rawlings and Wilder had, but was not remembered alongside them.

It was not until the 1990s that critics began to question Buck’s dismissal by their predecessors and to re-evaluate their own automatic acceptance of her condemnation. As Peter Conn, who was drawn to Buck not through his role as a literary critic but via an adoption through the Pearl Buck Foundation’s Welcome House, explains,

I was tempted by an increasing interest in Pearl Buck. I met a number of people who had known her, and who had obviously been changed for the better by the relationship. Frankly, Terry [Conn’s wife] and I were touched by the extraordinary effort Buck had made to combine a literary life with a commitment to human service.

Still, I kept my distance from Buck as a possible subject; she seemed too risky an investment. A smug consensus has reduced Pearl Buck to a footnote—a judgement, I hasten to add, in which I had routinely concurred. As recently as 1989, I published a 600-page history of American literature, in which I found room for everyone from the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Urian Oakes to the twentieth-century propagandist Giacomo Patri, but I never mentioned Pearl Buck. (PSB: Cultural Biography xii) .

In 1992, the Randolph-Macon Women’s College where Buck had studied hosted a major symposium to mark the hundredth anniversary of Buck’s birth. When Peter Conn and his wife visited China in 1993, they learned of a group of young scholars in Chengdu who were translating Buck’s novels into Chinese because “‘Through these books’, they write, ‘we understand the Chinese farmers’ hardship, struggle and happiness before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.’” (Conn, PSB: Cultural Biography xx). In 1996, Conn finally published his biography of Pearl Buck, the first essentially neutral biography to appear since her death--in 1973 Buck’s ‘official’ biographer, Theodore Harris published the first biography, which was followed in 1983 by Nora Stirling’s *Pearl Buck: a Woman in Conflict* whose main focus was to bring to light the sordid details of the Buck-Harris partnership that nearly discredited the Pearl S. Buck Foundation and all of Buck’s other charitable projects.

In 1997, only three years after the official Communist Party ban on her books was lifted, Chinese scholar Kang Liao published *Pearl S. Buck: a Cultural Bridge Across the Pacific*. His glowing praise of Buck as a writer, cross-cultural diplomat and his assertion of the anthropological value of her detail-filled writing to Chinese historians in particular and the Chinese people in general, effectively rehabilitated the much-villified Pearl Buck in the eyes of Chinese academics. In his work, he credits Buck with providing the first positive literary archetype of a strong Chinese woman as well as being the first author to write about Chinese peasants and farmers. At a time in China's history where much of its literary legacy was produced as an adjunct to politics, Buck's writing is a precious part of China's cultural heritage, Liao maintains. As he explains,

When we finally woke up from the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution, the greatest cultural disaster in China's four thousand-year history, we asked, among many other questions: What was the real situation in the rural areas when the land belonged to individuals rather than to the state? How did the peasants and farmers work and become rich then? What was the customary relationship between the labourers and the landlord? How did the farmers feel about the land they owned? What did they need and desire? How did Confucianism function among the illiterate peasants and farmers? Now that the traditional values have been largely destroyed, and communist ethics have proved inapplicable, what can replace them? Should we have wholesale westernization in China? Can we keep our national identity? What should we inherit from our tradition? To my surprise, Pearl Buck dealt with most of these questions in her works. (15)

Embraced by Chinese scholars, given a second chance by American critics, Pearl Buck's near-disappearance into literary oblivion was effectively halted in 2005, when *The Good Earth* was selected as one of the year's books for the hugely popular Oprah's Book Club. Suddenly, a new generation of readers all across the country discovered Wang Lung and O-lan and learned about a time in Chinese history they had only glimpsed at through the writing of Chinese-American authors such as Amy Tan. And in 2010, Pearl Buck found herself on the same bookshelf as strong Chinese women characters Jiang Qing and Ci Xi, when Chinese-American author Anchee Min, who had written about Madame Mao and the Empress Dowager, published *Pearl of China*, a novel about a fictional friendship between Buck and a young Chinese girl.

Pearl S. Buck was finally rehabilitated and rescued from the oblivion into which her colleagues had fervently hoped she would sink.

Now that Buck has taken up the place that should have been hers all along, that of the respected author who was her country's first female recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, it becomes even more important to re-examine her work with the critical bias of over half a century

removed. In this essay, I have attempted to envision Buck for who she was, while retaining a clear perspective on the ‘when’ that she was writing from.

This chapter began by situating her most well-known novel within the trend of Depression-era literature. This is important because it helps to clearly define Buck’s audience and to explain her popularity. American Depression-era literature was a narrative about struggle, loss, and modernity that featured a near-sacred depiction of ‘the land’. Pearl S. Buck offered her readers all this and also, by writing about a ‘foreign’ world, held out the promise of exoticism: that what disenchanted readers had lost in the great tide of modernity might still exist elsewhere.

Pearl Buck provided an imagined Other world to Americans at a time when they needed it most, and they responded by falling in love with the image of China that she presented them. Her China was a reconstruction of a lifetime of experience, filled with anthropological detail, but it was also an exotic offering where the land, the rituals of daily life and the simplicity of subsistence became more sacred as they became more distant.

Buck’s exoticism, like Victor Segalen’s, also featured a reverence toward the Other. But unlike Segalen, whose adoration did not extend to the peasants and farmers, Buck responded to the American tradition that glorified the common man and filled her work with populist reverence for the Chinese peasants. Like her contemporary John Steinbeck—and like Jack London and Mark Twain before him—she sought wisdom in the words of the common man and found hope in his struggles and the simplicity of his life.

This combination of reverence for the exotic Other and veneration of the common man helped bring Buck’s readers to the understanding that two people could be foreign and different to one another, and yet share the same desires and dreams, and follow the same cycle of life. As Wang Lung’s simple wisdom reminds us, “Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone back into the earth. So would their house, sometime, return into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth” (31). In this, all of humanity was essentially the same, and by seeing humanity, both Self and Other, in its simplest and most sacred form, one could see past the artificial barriers of race, culture and nation.

This, after all, was Pearl S. Buck’s most cherished belief: that there would one day be a brotherhood of man, where difference was embraced and understanding between cultures was encouraged. This is the idea that was at the heart of all her endeavours, be they literary,

charitable or cultural. In this, Kang Liao claims, she was ahead of her time: according to him, Pearl Buck was “one of the few lamps that shed light from her age of Eurocentrism upon our age of multiculturalism” (14).

# Conclusion

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*From Kublai Khan to Pandas and 'Made in China'*

When Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his famous opium-induced *Kubla Khan*, he turned a place that was geographically real into a realm of the imagination, by imbuing it with elements of pleasure, sensuality, danger and difference. Beginning with the image of a Mongol emperor's summer palace, he adds in an erupting volcano, caverns of ice and an Abyssinian maid and concludes that should he build himself a pleasuredome, he would be somehow dangerous, perverted by having "drunk the milk of paradise" (Coleridge 157). This practice of turning the world of an Other into a fantasy world had begun long before Coleridge's time and continued long after.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practice had refined itself into what Spence refers to as a "new exotic" that, after several centuries, had established a "core of mutually reinforcing images" (145) that essentially defined China in the European and Euro-American mind. Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu owes his origins to the prejudices and fears that this collective idea of China and the Orient inspired, while Victor Segalen sought the mysterious, unified and intellectual China that had inspired earlier European philosophers, at the same time rejecting any idea of Progress within his imagined, exotic China. Pearl S. Buck gave her readers a China that was mostly stripped of the centuries-worth of prejudice and assumptions, but provided nonetheless an ideological refuge from the reality of economic modernity and its disasters. All three authors drew on the notion of the exotic in order to present their readers with their vastly differing fictions of a distant and different land.

In this thesis, I have explored three distinct examples of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature about China through the perspective of exoticism. Exoticism is a unique and historically-dependent way of imagining the Other, founded, above all, on a sense of longing for a better world and a desire to experience, either directly or at a distance, the flavour of difference.

However, exoticism also occupied that problematic middle ground between well-intentioned appreciation and subconscious dissemination of the imperialist values of its time. While it cannot be said that exoticism contributed wholeheartedly to the advancement of European imperialism, it is also impossible to look at it as completely detached from the culture

and society from whence it came. Exoticism, ultimately, was a form of soft power, whether it was intended that way by its authors or whether their ideas and characterizations were co-opted by imperialist administrators. As Rousseau and Porter explain, “Labelling the anthropological Other as exotic legitimated treating the peoples of the ‘third world’ as fit to be despised—destroyed even—while concurrently also constituting them as projections of Western fantasies” (7). When difference was still equated with inferiority, all exoticism lent itself to imperialist objectives. Even Pearl Buck, who attempted to reverse many of the assumptions about the Chinese Other, could not prevent her characters, stuck forever in time and appearing more and more backward as time passed, from representing a China that was, in truth, rapidly changing.

Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century exoticism began as a reaction against modernity, a way of carving out individual spaces away from the forces of societal change. Through exoticism, authors and their readers could imagine an Other world where they were not alienated, disillusioned or disenfranchised by modernity, industrialization and the homogenizing forces of technology. Ultimately, however, in the tumult of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exoticism was swept away by a globalizing modernity that offered fewer and fewer escape holes.

Today, although we may still seek out worlds that are Other and outside of modernity, China is no longer such a place. With Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms and the ensuing global manufacturing revolution that re-invented China as the source of inexpensive goods for the increasingly affluent developed world, China is no longer seen as a land of mystery. As consumer demand for lower prices and shareholder demand for increasing profits force Chinese factories to circumvent already lax safety standards, the condemnatory phrase ‘Made in China’ and the ensuing vision of toxic, low-wage, polluting factories has become an increasingly frequent way of imagining the Middle Kingdom.

And how do we conceptualize our relationships between China and the West? Some seventy-five years ago, Pearl S. Buck founded the East-West Association in order to promote greater understanding of China. Passionate about her vision of a world where East and West shared in a peaceful brotherhood of dialogue and understanding, her efforts were ultimately swept away by the fear and insularity of the Cold War. Today, there is no longer a Cold War and diplomacy between China and the West is a successful enterprise: there are trade agreements, official visits and excellent diplomatic ties.

Recently, Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper took delivery of two pandas destined to remain in Canada on a ten-year lease to the Toronto and Calgary zoos. The transfer of the animals themselves, despite featuring a fanfare of media attention, was not strange in any way, and agreements between countries over the lease of zoo animals or works of art are not uncommon; what was uniquely strange about the Canada-China panda transfer was the rhetoric that accompanied it. CTV News reported that, according to Yuen Pau Woo, CEO of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, the pandas "will provide an unprecedented 'window' into Chinese culture" and "will provide Canadians with another lens from which to view China". Prime Minister Harper himself is quoted as affirming that "Over the coming years these pandas will help us learn more about one another while serving as a reminder of our deepening relationship" (CTV News).

In the wake of the tumultuous upheavals of the Second World War, Pearl S. Buck attempted to foster greater understanding of China by inviting scholars and learning about Chinese customs. Today, a loan of pandas is seen as sufficient. Does this mean that Buck's goal of greater understanding has already been achieved, allowing us to envision business relationships in a more Chinese way, where *guanxi*, acquired through gifts and connections, is more important than merely possessing deep cultural understanding? Or does it mean that both societies, in modernizing, have become more frivolous and are content to substitute true cultural acceptance and understanding with an exchange of animals?

One thing is certain. When the flora and fauna—and in particular the endangered fauna—of a once-exotic land can cross the world in a Fedex plane, that land is firmly outside the realm of the exotic.



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