

Viatcheslav Vetrov, Review of: Wang Mingming, *The West As the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 2014, in: *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 62 (2014), pp. 389-394.

In his new monograph *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*, Wang Mingming takes Edward Said's *Orientalism* both as a point of departure and as a central object of a critical inquiry. Since its appearance in 1978, *Orientalism* has remained one of the most heatedly debated works in Oriental studies. Critical discussions of it have brought into being such voluminous monographs as Dan Diner's *Versiegelte Zeit: Über den Stillstand in der islamischen Welt* (2007) and Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (2007.) Wang Mingming's study, which was also inspired by Said's ideas and concepts, testifies to the continuing actuality of *Orientalism*. For better understanding, in what exactly Wang follows and for what he criticizes Said, it seems necessary to call to mind some of Said's central arguments.

For Said, Orientalism primarily reflects East/West power relations in the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the Orient was colonized by the Occident. During this epoch of the Occidental (Western) domination over the Orient, the Orient became an object of academic studies in which it was constantly represented from the Western point of view *for* the Western public. These representations were among other things products of the colonialist imagination of Orientalists', i.e. Western scholars studying the Orient, whose foremost premise was the conviction that the Orient was not able to represent itself. In Said's book, imagination is discussed *only* as far as it is related to the period of colonization: he neither aims at constructing a genealogy of Western images of the East from the antiquity till modern times, nor does he put into question the capacities of non-Western cultures to use imagination in their treatment of the Other.

In Said's use of terms, Orientalism is not a neutral concept. Its negative connotations are due to the fact that Orientalists' imagination supported unequal power relations between the Orient and the Occident. Furthermore, Orientalism is not an insignificant accessory phenomenon peculiar to colonization, but one its main products. It is a channel for distorted images. It is a tradition of *idees reçues*, or academic commonplaces meant to support the colonialist powers over the colonized Orient. To challenge these misconceptions was one of the central purposes of Said's book.

Said's broaching the issue of distorted representations of the Orient in Orientalists' works approximately coincided with the beginnings of the *crisis of representation* in anthropology. Here, too, describing the Other was increasingly felt as problematic due to the rising post-colonial consciousness: Western ethnographers who had previously found no fault with acting as "civilized persons" and who had to confront and describe natives unfamiliar with civilized (i.e. Western) norms, were now challenged for reflecting colonialist superiority. Like many anthropologists of his time who tried to change this unfair situation and to confirm the Other in his/her rights, for example like Clifford Geertz whom Said sympathetically mentioned in *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup>, Said pursued the similar aim of liberating the Oriental from the grip of Orientalists' distorting representations.

Wang Mingming follows Said in putting his own discussion of Orientalism into the context of the anthropological crisis of representation. What he finds problematic about Said's work, is Said's alleged presumption to treat the West (the Occident) as the only subject capable of producing imaginative pictures of the Other: „As a canonical work for post-colonial studies, it [Said's

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books 2003, p. 326.

*Orientalism*-V.V.] ironically carries on the same modern Western thought it critiques. While Said is critical of the expansive power of modern Western knowledge, his work paradoxically functions as if a spirit possesses us and presses us to treat the West as the only imaginative and perceptive subject.“ ( p. 9.)

As an analogue to Said's Orientalism, Wang elaborates a genealogy (sic!) of Chinese Occidentalism, i.e. metamorphoses of perceptions of the West as the Other that corresponded to some fundamental paradigm shifts in the history of Chinese civilization. These perceptions are not to be understood simply as various possible ways of a geographical segmentation of reality, but as works of imagination which re-constructed the reality in accord with some unfolding changes of symbolical meanings pertaining to the image of the West. All varieties of Chinese cosmo-geographic positionings of the West are discussed by Wang as representing one of the following three types: 1) other-centric narratives treating the West as a sacred realm (as in Chinese Buddhist Journeys to the West); 2) ethno-centric ones arising from tributary diplomacy and civilizing projects (as in the „gazettes“ of foreign countries); 3) the elemental form which combines the other two types (p. 24.)

Wang begins his discussion with the cosmo-geographic positioning of the West in *Mu tianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳 (*Biography of King Mu of Zhou*) which is to exemplify the third type in his classification. In this “first masterpiece of Chinese Occidentalism” (p. 83), the West appears as a sacred space. King Mu's journey to the extreme West is a ritual tour of inspection that culminates in his meeting the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母). For Wang, “King Mu's choice to be hosted by Xi Wangmu was an expression of his inclination to include the tribes in the West in his “map of the world” by means of ritual intercourse, not military expedition or universal religious mission.” (p. 46) Thus, the sacred West is simultaneously perceived in terms of tributary relations. King Mu represents the civilization, Xiwangmu – the wilderness. However, the wilderness is not to be subdued and Xiwangmu's realm remains symbolically higher than that of her civilized guest (p. 46.) Wang interprets the attitude of this first piece of Chinese Occidentalism to the other (the West) as one of open-mindedness and politeness (pp.40, 41). By the period of Qin 秦 and Han 漢, the sacred direction ceases to be associated with the West. The Occidentalism of Xiwangmu gives way to the Easternism of the Immortality Mountains. From later Han to the Northern Wei 北魏 (386-534) period, the West regains its sacred status, but it is Buddha and not Xiwangmu who becomes the object of worship and for this reason India replaces the semi-mythical Kunlun 崑崙 -Mountain as the geographic projection of the imagined blissful land. Wang focusses on Faxian's 法顯 (337-422) journey as a milestone in the revitalization of the Western Heavens: Chinese monks' pilgrimages to India secured the West's sacred status till Song 宋-Yuan 元, when China replaced India as the center of Buddhism in East Asia (p. 192.) During Song-Yuan the Western territories (Xiyu 西域) become largely associated with the world of Islam, which unlike Buddhism did not develop into a “popular religion” in China and for this reason did not provide a new narrative of the Western Heaven (pp. 189-190.) It was only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that this new version could be produced: The promised land of Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy which was geographically located in Europe and America replaced India as the source of truth.

One of the most prominent features of Wang's analysis is an attempt to portrait the West within Chinese Occidentalism not simply as a romanced Other, but as an Other that is revered and primarily perceived as “superior”: “[...] and as we have repeatedly emphasized, despite the “pragmaticism” that characterized “the religion of the Chinese people”, the “ethos” of other-centrism was also pursued by our ancestors. At a great number of historical moments, in the world activities of the virtuous kings,

sages, monks, and modern “literati”, the other was respected as the superior (p. 275.)“ This view lets Chinese imagination appear in a far more favorable light than the representations of the Orient in Orientalists’ works criticized by Said. However, Wang’s arguments that rest on his interpretation of Chinese sources are not always plausible. For example, turning to *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*), which, by the way, receives rather too short (pp. 110-111) a treatment in view of its central relevance to Wang’s cosmo-geographic reconstructions, he says: „Compared to Greek writings on „barbarians“, *Shan Hai Jing* is not only „more detailed and elaborate“ (Needham, 1986, p. 240<sup>2</sup>), but is also a more sophisticated reflection on the self-other relationships in „civilization.” The classical text celebrates the “ethnic”, the marginal, the demonic, and the divine in its own “centering” of cosmology (p.111).” Wang provides no illustrative examples of the reported greater sophistication of the Chinese classic in comparison with Greek texts and he does not explain, what exactly he means by “celebrating the marginal.” After this benevolent passing remark on *Shanhaijing* he promptly turns his attention to the character “self” (己 *ji*) in Xu Shen’s 許慎 (ca. 58- ca. 147) *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (*Explaining Simple and Compound Characters*)<sup>3</sup>, where the iconography of “*ji*” is related to that of 人腹 “*ren fu*” (human stomach(s)).<sup>4</sup> This change of texts under discussion is not quite self-explanatory. Wang is not explicit on whether he sees a conceptual connection between *Shanhaijing* and the passage from *Shuowen jiezi*. And yet Xu Shen’s explanation of “*ji*” in terms of “human stomach(s)” may be interpreted as a telling illustration of the relations between the (civilized) center and the marginal as they are presented in *Shanhaijing*: The expressions *shi zhi* 食之 (eat it; once you have eaten it) and *shi zhe* 食者 (a person who has eaten (it)) count among its most frequent textual components<sup>5</sup>. Exotic animals, fish, grasses are successively evoked in imagination as potential contents of one’s own stomach. Some of them are said to be good as medicine, some others can avert danger, but there are also some such “others” that are dangerous in themselves. Imagining the marginal “other” first of all addresses this “other’s” usefulness or danger to one’s own body. Thus, one of the main concerns of “the civilized stomach” in *Shanhaijing* seems to be less a “celebration of the other”, but rather a careful consideration of the qualities peculiar to the exotic other which/whom one imagines to meet on the margins of Tianxia.

Wang accentuates his discussion of Chinese Occidentalism on perceptions of the West (the other) as superior. For this reason, all those cases in which Chinese imagination worked in the opposite direction are left out of consideration. However, as Chinese history offers enough parallels with the Orientalists’ phantasies criticized by Said, drawing on such cases could have provided further

<sup>2</sup> Wang refers here to Joseph Needham’s and Colin A. Ronan’s *The Shorter Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume 2, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press (first published in 1981), p. 240, where Needham compares the scarcity of extant documents of the first map-making in Europe with the conceptual richness of “Yu Gong” 禹貢 (“Tribute of Yu”) chapter of the *Shujing* 書經 (*The Book of Documents*, composed between Western Zhou 11<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> and Qin 秦 - 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries before Christ): “But the Chinese document [“Yu Gong” - V. V.] is much more detailed and elaborate than anything which has come down to us from Anaximander’s time [7<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> centuries before Christ - V. V.]”

<sup>3</sup> In Xu Shen’s work, *wen* 文 and *zi* 字 represent two distinct classes of characters. Wang’s translation of the title as *Interpretations of Writing and Characters* (pp. 111, 364) is therefore not quite comprehensible.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi*, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1963, p. 309.

<sup>5</sup> For example, at the beginning of the first juan „Nanshanjing” 南山經 (“The Mountains of the South”), the following being is reported to live in the South: “有獸焉其狀如禺而白耳，伏行人走，其名曰狝狝食之善走。” (“There lives an animal that resembles a monkey, but has white ears; it walks like man, but is stooping; it is called *xingxing*; eat it and (you will be) good at walking.”) *Shanhaijing jianshu* 山海經箋疏, Hao Yixing 郝懿行 (ed.), Si bu bei yao, Taibei: Taiwan zhonghua shuju 1965, juan 1, p. 2A. The North is said to be full of exotic creatures, one of them is fish *qi* 鯀 whose characteristics are as follows: “魚身而犬首，其音如嬰兒，食之已狂。” (“It has the body of a fish and the head of a dog, it cries like a child, eat it and (your) madness will be over.”) (*Ibid.*, juan 3, p. 7A-B) Another Northern inhabitant that cries like a child is called *paoxiao* 狛獠, it is reported to be dangerous, as it eats humans (*shi ren* 食人, *ibid.*, p. 10A. )

important details to the discussion of Said. For example, Chinese policy of pacifying barbarians could have been discussed in this connection. In the anonymous *Pingding luocha fanglüe* 平定羅刹方略 (*Strategic Plans for Pacifying the Demons*, end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century), to mention only one case, it was officially reported that 1690, during the battles for Albazin, one of the early Russian outposts on the Heilongjiang 黑龍江 river, the Russians (*luocha* 羅刹, lit. *demons*), who are introduced as “wild, avaricious, mean and uncultivated” (獷悍貪鄙冥頑 *guanghan tanbi mingwan*<sup>6</sup>) beings, praised the all surpassing grace of emperor Kangxi and laid their arms down as soon as they got informed about this emperor’s “love for everything living and virtuous attention to the affairs of the state (*hao sheng de yi* 好生德意)<sup>7</sup>.” This kind of political imagination demonstrates a diversity of ways in which China acted as an „imaginative subject“ in its treatment of the Other.

It would be also interesting to know where exactly the author locates Russia within his cosmogeographic conceptions. In *Orientalism*, Said explicitly referred to it as a Western colonial power<sup>8</sup>. Wang, on his part, does not discuss it, although Russia, being a territorial rival of China, a trade partner, the first foreign power to negotiate with China on the basis of a bilateral treaty etc., contributed significantly to the rise of what he designates as the modern Occidentalism. As Wang takes Bin Chun’s 斌椿 (1803-1871) European journey, which took place in 1866, i.e. about one and a half centuries after Tulishen’s 圖理琛 (1667-1740) voyage through Russian territories in 1712-1714<sup>9</sup>, to be “the very first Qing-embassy to the West” (p. 1), it seems likely that for Wang Russia cannot be associated with the West.

If for Said the point of view from which to discuss the works of Orientalists was that of Western civilization, in Wang’s study it is the point of view of Chinese culture that generated specifically Chinese conceptions of the West. What Wang does not consider in his analysis, is the relationship between Orientalism and Occidentalism, i. e. between the products of imagination that in Said’s study are to be understood as representing Orient by Western scholars and those which for Wang exemplify the imagination of Chinese intellectuals in the frame of the modern Occidentalism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of China, this question seems to deserve special attention, because it was not only the Western Orientalists who participated in the construction of Sinological knowledge at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. China’s participation in this process was at least as intensive as that of the colonial powers. For example, the question concerning specific features characteristic of Chinese imagination in comparison with its Western counterpart was raised by Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) in his *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中國小說史略 (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 1930) some 80 years before Wang Mingming’s study. Exactly like Wang Mingming, Lu Xun turned to the texts of *Mu tianzi zhuan* and *Shanhaijing* while reflecting on this problem, and again exactly like Wang Mingming, he drew parallels with Greece (Greek mythology) which provided a Western counterpart for the work of Chinese imagination. In view of the power relations between China and the West in Lu Xun’s time, it is comprehensible why he tried to explain the reasons for Chinese imagination being underdeveloped in comparison with that of Ancient Greece<sup>10</sup>. And it seems to be no coincidence that Lu Xun backed his judgment of Chinese imagination by the authority of a renowned Japanese scholar (Shionoya On

<sup>6</sup> *Pingding luocha fanglüe*, in: *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 1995-2002, Vol. 390, pp. 407-431, here p. 407 A.

<sup>7</sup> *Pingding luocha fanglüe*, p. 429 A.

<sup>8</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books 2003, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> For one of the earliest Chinese accounts of Russia, see Tulishen’s *Yi yu lu* 異域錄 (*Records of Foreign Territories*.)

<sup>10</sup> Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe*, in: *Lu Xun quan ji* 魯迅全集, Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe 1982, Vol. 9, pp. 1-297, here pp. 21-22.

塩谷温, 1878-1962<sup>11</sup>), as in Lu Xun's time Japan counted as a dependable source of wisdom in questions concerning an effective and rapid Westernization. That Wang Mingming's judgment reads contrary to those of Lu Xun and Shionoya On, can therefore be hardly explained as a result of a new choice of sources under study or of a new combination of cultures to be compared. The difference seems rather to arise from a new political consciousness which has dominated the treatment of the Other in anthropology since the publication of Said's work and the beginnings of the crisis of representation. Thus, of all the Chinese images of the West as the Other examined by Wang the central one paradoxically receives only a marginal discussion and is limited to the above critique of Said: i. e. the West as a colonial power, which can no longer prevent Orientals from representing themselves from their own point of view. As the post-colonial discourse, which has made such a critique in the first place possible, relies heavily on the achievements of Edward Said, it seems permissible to regard *The West as the Other* as an – if even deeply concealed - acknowledgment of these achievements.

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<sup>11</sup> Shionoya On, *Shina bungaku gairon kōwa* 支那文学概論講話 (*Introduction into Chinese Literature*), Tōkyō: Dai Nihon Yūbenkai 1919. For Shionoya's explanation of the shortcomings of Chinese imagination, see p. 348.