

# Images of Images of Images: On Teaching "The Image of China in Western Literature" to Chinese Students

*Nicholas Koss*

## ABSTRACT

Here I discuss the dialogue that takes place between my Chinese university students and myself (their teacher) as we study the images of China presented in a series of Western literary texts. Our first problem is to distinguish between the Chinese image in the mind of an individual (author), the image in the collective thinking of a group (society, culture) and the media image. Then historical and cultural relativism come into play: we must be aware of the historical reality at the time of occurrence of an image which now seems "unreal," and of the truth to Westerners of an image which may seem fantastic or distorted to Chinese (and vice versa). These are the sorts of modalities I discuss with my students as we analyze texts, and both sides in this East-West "dialogue" gain a deeper understanding: we become more conscious of one another's underlying cultural presuppositions, the lenses through which we view (our images of) one another.

## KEY WORDS

dialogue  
collective  
impression  
cultural  
uniformity

images  
individual  
historical  
(un)reality  
relativity

Since 1984, almost annually, I have been teaching a one-semester undergraduate course in Comparative Literature entitled "The Image of China in Western Literature."<sup>1</sup> The emphasis of the course is on Western works of literature that deal with China but we also study other kinds of texts on China as well. The number of students who sign up for the course is usually small, so there is ample opportunity for discussion. At one time my department was hesitant to offer such a course because of the sensitivities involved but eventually it was possible to offer the course, but I continue to be aware that the topic can be easily misunderstood. It also should be noted that there is ample Chinese material for a course entitled "The Image of the West in China."<sup>2</sup>

The texts that we consider in "The Image of China in Western Literature" are studied in chronological order. After a brief discussion of Latin and Greek texts dealing with China, and after noting that there are no new Western texts on China from approximately 650 to 1250, we then read Marco Polo and a few other medieval texts. Ricci's writings on China are taken as medieval texts. Ricci's writings on China are taken as representative of the 17th century, and for the 18th century Voltaire's *Orphan of China* and Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World* are read. The nineteenth century is represented by Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Conrad. The works selected Ezra Pound, *Marco Millions* by Eugene O'Neill, *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, and *The Good Person of Sichuan* by Bertolt Brecht. For a number of years, in dealing with the 20th century, I included works from Chinese-American literature, such *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Year of the Dragon* by Frank Chin.<sup>3</sup>

To the extent possible, for each of these works, we first try to identify the image of China presented; the source of the image and whatever intermediaries are involved; the author's relationship to China; the intended audience for the text; and perhaps most importantly, the function of the image in the structure of the text. When pertinent, we also discuss the historical situation in China and in the West at the time of the composition of the text.

In discussing the image or images of China itself, we try to discriminate among an image in the mind of an individual, an image in the collective thinking of a group, and an image in the media. At the same time an attempt is made to keep some grasp of the historical reality at the time of the occurrence of the image. Our approach to the image of China then has elements of literary history, biographical interpretation, textual and structural

analysis, and reader response.

In this paper, I want to discuss the dialogue that takes place between the students and me as we study these texts. At first, I had thought that this course would be a routine imparting of knowledge to the students, but I quickly came to see that it was to be a learning experience for both students and teacher. Also, I came to realize that the "working" image of China that I begin with and take to the text is quite different from the students'. Another interesting aspect of our dialogue is that whereas in some ways I could be perhaps an intended reader of these texts, the students are not. If anything, they are the readers who should not be reading these texts.

I have always accepted personal or individual images as existing in the mind of an individual as a reality. To see whether collective images are also a reality, I usually begin the course asking the students to write down four or five adjectives describing Americans and four or five adjectives describing Chinese. Over the years I have been surprised at the general uniformity of the students' response, and it has become predictable what these responses will be. The students will usually describe Americans with words such as "open," "active," "individualistic," and "independent," whereas Chinese will be said to be "conservative," "hardworking," "shy," and "passive." To what extent these images accord with reality is another question, but the repetition of similar adjectives year after year has convinced me that there are indeed collective images.<sup>4</sup>

In briefly discussing the classical Latin and Greek texts on China, the students usually appear bored by the fact that anyone could possibly think that silk grows on trees (Virgil, *Georgics*, II, 121) or that China is at the far end of the known world (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historiae*, VI, 20) or that the people from the land of silk do not speak to others (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, XXIII, 6).<sup>5</sup> I am intrigued by these ideas that form some of the earliest images of China in the West but the students do not share my enthusiasm. Maybe it really is boring, except as a footnote to Chinese-Western cultural relations. But I also have learned that my understanding or image of history differs from that of the students. I am still dominated by an image of history as progress. For the students, however, it seems the past is simply past. I get the impression that the Han Dynasty — the time of some of these Latin and Greek images — does not differ that much qualitatively for them from the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911) as past.

*The Travels of Marco Polo* is a text that raises many challenging problems regarding the image of China. We do not know for sure if the image is Polo's,

Rusticello's, or some one else's. The textual tradition is so complex that the image can differ depending on which manuscript is used. The image also seems to have been influenced by the Medieval romance. And there are many excellent annotated editions of the text that help to establish the historical reality behind the text.<sup>6</sup> All of these factors have a certain amount of intellectual interest for the students and also allow discussion on problems of authorship, textual criticism, generic conventions, and historical research.

The main attraction of this text for Westerners, however, is that it is the first rather full account of China we have in the West. But many of the students are not impressed, because for them it seems to be a rather rudimentary, superficial description of their country, of which they have already seen much earlier and fuller descriptions. Occasionally, a student will be interested enough to compare the description of Kublai Khan's capital with those in Chinese sources, and more recently, to see what is said about women in China. But on the whole, the text causes no excitement, and raises only a little intellectual interest.

By this time I am concerned as to whether the students will find any of the course simulating, but, fortunately, they are usually very taken by the chapters from *The Journals* of Matteo Ricci we read on China.<sup>7</sup> I suppose I am biased by a current Western negative image of missionaries and wrongly expect the students to react to Ricci in that way. But that does not occur. Students either agree rather heartily with Ricci's view of Chinese culture or find themselves learning about it from him. The students, given their education in the Republic of China, have a very Confucian view of society, so I see Ricci's accommodations with Confucianism satisfying their presuppositions. But, the more I think of it, it is also a case of Ricci, an intelligent writer with a definite purpose, being able to entice thinking Chinese to start a dialogue. His effect on the students might have been similar to the effect he had on Chinese literati in the Ming Dynasty. With this text, the students and myself rather easily enter into an intellectual, theoretical discussion of Chinese culture and civilization. And we are also able to talk about the real cultural exchanges starting to take place between Europe and China at this time.

*The Orphan of China* by Voltaire is the first actual work of literature that we study.<sup>8</sup> At first I thought that the students would not respond well to this play because of Voltaire's freedom in his use of the original Chinese drama and because of the language and conventions of 18th-century French drama.<sup>9</sup> To my surprise, none of this seems to bother the students, rather

they react to the play with a great deal of emotion and sympathy, for they seem to understand fully the choices Idema and her husband must make when the duty of being a parent conflicts with the obligations of service to the emperor. It seems the decisions Idema makes are the ones the students would make or would like to be able to make if faced with similar situations.

When we start discussing the possible reasons for Voltaire to write this play, they begin to see how the Confucian values in the play can have a meaning related to the political and religious situation of 18th-century France, and they come to see that the Confucian image of China presented is being used by Voltaire for very particular purposes, so that the drama should not be read just as a confirmation of Confucian values.

With *The Orphan of China*, I can also draw attention to the role of translation in carrying images from one place to another, for Voltaire's version is based on a French translation of the original done by a Jesuit, and Voltaire's image is then carried elsewhere through English and other translations. Furthermore, the concept of literature committed to a cause can also be discussed.

With some understanding of the Jesuit material on China and with a recognition of Voltaire's use of China for his particular purposes, the students have no trouble in interpreting Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*.<sup>10</sup> They easily see it as a satire on the image of China in 18th-century England. And we are able to discuss how images, which originally might be quite accurate, can still lead to misperceptions and odd behavior on the part of the receptors, if the receptors are deficient in processing information. Goldsmith shows us how positive images of China can be misunderstood and misinterpreted by supposedly well-meaning receptors. But having noticed the satiric intent, the students assume they have exhausted all possible meaning from the text and do not see the possible Confucian seriousness underlying it.

The nineteenth century is where I begin to have problems in selecting texts, and I surprise myself by the amount of censorship I do of the material available.<sup>11</sup> If I were teaching the image of the West in China, I would probably relish gathering as many negative images of Westerners as possible, and then sorting through which ones are valid and which ones might perhaps reflect more the ignorance of the author. But, for whatever reasons, I am unable to do this with any enthusiasm for the nineteenth-century image of China in the West. It still remains incomprehensible to me how there could be so much misunderstanding and misperception in both the West and China at that time, even on the part of well-educated authors. At the same time,

I also wonder what could be possibly be gained by the students from reading some of the negative accounts of China.

We begin our investigation into the 19th century with a look at Emerson and Torean and their interest in China, which is neutral enough, but not all that intellectually stimulating.<sup>12</sup> Then, in trying to face the issue of the 19th-century Western image of China, I have them read Mark Twain's little essay "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy" and Bret Harte's short story "Wan Lee the Pagan." The emotional reaction on the part of the students is usually so high that I suspect that after their reading these two works a vehement demonstration could be easily organized against Westerners. The power of literature to arouse passions was never so vivid to me. There is so little distance between the students and the boys stoned to death. I try to explain how that by treating this material Twain and Harte were speaking out against the injustices they describe, but such remarks do little to assuage the students. How could such deeds have been done remains the focus of their attention.

Another 19th-century view of China we study is that in *Typhoon* by Joseph Conrad.<sup>13</sup> In their reading, the students do not seem to identify with the coolies described in the work, and dispassionately analyze the images presented.

The twentieth-century is even richer than the 18th century in texts dealing with China, and, besides missionary, diplomatic, business and scholarly accounts, there are a number of literary texts. I limit my discussion to Pound, O'Neill, Brecht, and Pearl Buck, and make passing reference to Chinese-American literature.<sup>14</sup>

In presenting Ezra Pound to the students,<sup>15</sup> my biggest challenge is to elicit any interest at all from them in him. In general, they do not like reading Chinese poetry in translation, and they are not convinced that Pound has captured anything of value in his renditions of Chinese poetry. As for me, I'm fascinated by what Pound has done, and if there were more interest on the part of the students, would want to do a careful analysis of how Pound creates his image of China out of the material he has at hand. The students eventually come to appreciate the importance of Pound for Modern poetry and are pleased that Chinese poetry has been an influence on Western poetry, but in general their reaction is similar to what they had to Polo's account of China: its rather superficial and is done much better in Chinese. This leads me to think that Pound, despite his interest in and use of China, is in fact very much culture-specific. It seems to me that it is only with great difficulty that he can be appreciated outside the West.

The students usually enjoy reading *Marco Millions*<sup>16</sup> by Eugene O'Neill, especially since they are already familiar with *The Travels of Marco Polo*. They seem to find satisfaction in figuring out how O'Neill used *The Travels* as a source, and also are either amused, if they have a good understanding of Taoism, by O'Neill's presentation of it, or impressed, if they have only a general acquaintance. Their greatest puzzlement, however, regards Princess Kukachin. They find it hard to imagine why or how she could be so in love with Polo, and they cannot understand why she would want to die because of unrequited love, whereas for *The Orphan of China* they easily appreciated Idema's willingness to die for her son. The students also do not at first perceive how the spiritual values of China are being contrasted with the business values of Americans in the 1920s, so they miss much of the satire on the American businessman. *Babbitt* is a new concept to them. Nonetheless, the play engenders a great deal of discussion.

I include *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck in this course because of its historical importance in creating an image of the China for America and the West.<sup>17</sup> This I can explain to the students. What I did not expect from the students was their extremely positive reaction to the novel, for Buck's reputation in the West has been on the wane for some time. The students read the work as Chinese literature, and have an emotional closeness and involvement with the book that does not take place for any other of the texts we read.

In reading *The Good Woman of Sichuan* by Bertolt Brecht,<sup>18</sup> the students usually respond with enthusiasm. They notice the conventions of Chinese theatre that Brecht uses and seem to understand very well the problem of trying to do, or be, good in a world that seems not to care. What I find interesting with Brecht and his image of China in the play is that the students find his characters to be very convincingly Chinese, when in fact, as far as I understand it, Brecht had no intention of creating "Chinese" characters, but rather characters with universal implications. He wanted to use China as a setting to create a sense of distance in the audience from what was happening on stage. Therefore, for *The Good Woman*, what might be alienating for a Western audience seems to become endearing to a Chinese one.

For works by Chinese-American authors that we read in class, such as *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Year of the Dragon* by Frank Chin, what I have discovered is that the students are generally not very receptive to these works. They seem to be much more critical of an

image of China created by a Chinese-American than of an image created by a Westerner. There is a certain tolerance for what they see as Western misconceptions but little for what they seem to be convinced are Chinese-American distortions. Try as I might to offer what I think might be useful information on Chinese-Americans, the students for the most part remain adamant that what they are reading is not Chinese; they see what these authors offer is but yet another image of China, and not China itself.

In conclusion, it should be clear that what I have presented is my image of the student's image of the image of China presented in Western texts. But the students are aroused to discuss more in this course than in many others. They are never lacking in comments, especially critical ones. Some texts we can examine with intellectual rigor and others provide moments of high emotion. And there seems to be real exchange between the students and myself. I must often modify my interpretation of a particular text after I listen to the students' reactions, and I trust they do the same after our classroom discussion. The frequent similarities in the students' responses to these works over the years also suggest to me that their shared cultural values are much stronger than I had originally expected. If this course has a non-literary function, it might be in the area of what John K. Fairbank recently noted regarding the Chinese view of America:

The modern world has grown a bit cynical about ancient pieties like "international understanding" . . . but both for self-defense and for building a better world we [Americans] need to know the stereotypes through which the Chinese people have seen us. (xv)

Perhaps the same is true for Chinese students and the Western image of China.

## Notes

1. My interest in this topic began when I was a graduate student in the 1970s studying Comparative Literature at Indiana University under Eugene Eoyang, who taught a similar course. A second catalyst for my interest was Limin Chu's work on the image of China in the *Overland Monthly*. See his "Mirror of Darkness: The Images of China and the Chinese in the Fiction of the *Overland Monthly*," *Tamkang Review* 2.1 (1971) 15-49, 3.2 (1972) 1-40.

The Chinese title for this course is "*Hsi-fang wen-hsueh chung te Chung-kuo* 西方文學中的中國." When I use the term "image" it refers to views of Chinese civilization, as well as to those of the people.

A number of books give a survey of the image of China in the West or in a particular

- Western country or in a particular period of history but they seldom deal specifically with literary texts. These books include. Pierre Martino, *L'Orient dans la littérature française au XVIIIe et au XVIIIe siècles* (1906: rpt, Geneva: Slatkine, 1970); Harold R. Isaacs, *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India* (1958; New York: Capricorn, 1962); Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London: Oxford UP, 1967), Donald Lach, *China in the Eyes of Europe: The Sixteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968); John K. Fairbank, *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Adrian Hsia, *Deutsche Denker über China* (Frankfurt, 1985); Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong: Oxford UP, 1989); Steven W. Mosher, *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality* (New York: A New Republic Book-Basic Books, 1990).
- Dissertations include John B. Foster, "China and the Chinese in American Literature, 1850-1950," diss., U of Illinois, 1952; Robert F. McClellan, Jr. "The American Image of China, 1890-1905," diss., Michigan State, 1964.
2. Two recent English works on this topic are Chen Chang-fang, "Barbarian Paradise: Chinese Views of the United States, 1784-1911," diss., Indiana U, 1985 and R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, eds., *Land without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989).
  3. An optional feature of this course is the showing of Western films on China outside of class time. Films shown include *The Good Earth* (1937), *Dragon Seed* (1944), *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1961), and *Sand Pebbles* ( ).
  4. What I do not know is if it makes any difference to the mind in the processing of images whether it be a personal or collective one.
  5. The Greek and Latin references to China can be found in George Coedes, *Textes d'auteurs grecs et latin relatif a l'Extreme Orient depuis le IVe siecle av. J.C. jusqu'au XIVe siecle* (Paris: E. Teroux, 1910). A general discussion of these texts is in the first part of Volume 1 of *Cathay and the Way Thither; Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, trans. and ed by Henry Yule. Rev. ed. by Henri Cordier (Hakluyt Society, 1915). The understanding of China is Greek and Latin geographers is dealt with in Andrew L. March, *The Idea of China: Myth and theory in Geographic Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1974).
  6. See, for instance, Sir Henry Yule, trans. and ed., *The Book of Sir Marco Polo The Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (3rd ed. Rev. by Henri Cordier. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1921); A.C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Description of the World* (London: Routledge, 1938); and A. C. Moule, *Quinsai: With Other Notes on Marco Polo* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1957).
  7. We usually read Book One of *The Journals*. For a discussion of other Jesuit material on China see Arnold H. Rowbotham *Missionary and Mandarin: The Jesuits at the Court of China* (1942; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1966) as well as his "The Impact of Confucianism of Seventeenth Century Europe" *Far Eastern Quarterly* 4 (May 1945) 224-42. Seventeenth-century Europeans writing about China include Leibniz and La Mothe de Vayer. In England, Bacon, Raleigh, Burton, Pepys, Temple and others refer to China, these texts are discussed in Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* N. S. 1 (1940) 351-84.
- The semester length for this course does not permit looking at 16th-century

- Western texts on China but English translations of these Spanish and Portuguese texts include Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*, from the early translation of R. Parke, edited by Sir George T. Staunton; London: Hakluyt Society, 2 vols., 1853-54) and *South China in the Sixteenth Century: Being the Narratives of Galeote Pereira, Fr. Gaspar da Cruz, O.P., Fr. Martin de Rada, O.E.S.A. (1550-1575)*, ed. C.R. Boxer (London: Hakluyt Society, 1953).
8. There was much 18th-century interest in China, but for our course there is only time to deal with Voltaire and Goldsmith. A good introduction to this period is Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contexts in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. by J.C. Powell (1925: rpt. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968). Other French writers who deal with China include Fenelon, d'Argens, Montesquieu, Diderot, and Quesnay. Other English writers include Defoe, Thomas Percy, and William Jones, who are discussed in Ch'ien Chung-shu, "China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century," *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography*, N.S. 2 (1941), 7-48; 113-52. Voltaire's relation with China is discussed in Arnold H. Rowbothan, "Voltaire, Sinophile," *Proceedings of the MLAA* 47 (1932): 1050-65; and A. Owen Aldridge, "Voltaire and the Cult of China," *Tamkang Review* 2/3 (1971/72): 25-49.
  9. Two useful studies on this drama are Chen Shou-yi, "The Chinese Orphan: A Yuan Play. Its Influence on European Drama of the Eighteenth Century," *Tien Hsia* 3 (1936): 89-115; and Liu Wu-chi, "The Original Orphan of China," *Comparative Literature* 5 (1953): 193-213. An English translation of the Chinese drama on which Voltaire's play is based is *The Chao Orphan* trans. Huang Pi-twan, *Renditions* 9 (1978) 103-131.
  10. A study of the sources Goldsmith used is Hamilton Jewett Smith, *Oliver Goldsmith's The Citizen of the World* (1926; rpt. Hamden: Archon Books, 1970).
  11. For further information on the 19th-century image of China, see Mary Gertrude Mason, *Western Concepts of China and the Chinese, 1840-1876* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1973). There are numerous 19th-century diplomatic and missionary accounts of China. European writers concerned with China include Goethe, Hegel, Judith Gautier, and Tolstoy. Also useful is William L. Schwartz, *The Imaginative Interpretation of the Far East in Modern French Literature, 1800-1925* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honore Champion, 1927).
  12. Emperson's and Thoreau's interest in China is studied in Frederick Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1930); Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (1932: rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969); and Lyman V. Cady, "Thoreau's Quotations from the Confucian Books," *American Literature* 33 (1961), 20-32.
  13. Heliena Krenn of Fu Jen University has just completed a study of the image of China in Joseph Conrad.
  14. 20th-century American writers dealing with China include the poets John Gould Fletcher, Amy Lowell, and Gary Snyder, and the novelists Earl Derr Biggers, Louise Jordan Miln, Alice Tisdale Hobart, Richard McKenna, and John Hersey. European and British authors include Paul Claudel, Andre Malraux, Segalen, Hermann Hesse, G.L. Dickinson, Somerset Maugham, and Timothy Mo.
  15. For Pound, we read *Cathay*, and selections from his translations of the *Shih ching* (Book of Songs) and Confucius. I have been unsuccessful in getting students to read his Chinese Cantos. Studies on Pound and China include L. S. Dembo, *The*

- Confucian Odes of Ezra Pound: A Critical Appraisal*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1963); Wai-lim Yip, *Ezra Pound's Cathay* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969); and Carroll F. Terrell, "Cantos LII-LXI: The Chinese Cantos," in *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980) 202-258.
16. Studies dealing with O'Neill and China include Horst Frenz, "O'Neill and China," *Tamkang Review* 10 (1979) 5-16; Hsia An-min, "The Tao and Eugene O'Neill," diss. Indiana U, 1979; and James A. Robinson, *Eugene O'Neill and Oriental Thought: A Divided Vision* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1982).
  17. For more on Pearl Buck and China, see her autobiography, *My Several Worlds* (New York: Pocket Books, 1956) and Yu Yuh-chao, *Pearl S. Buck's Fiction: A Cross-cultural Interpretation* (Taipei: Institute of American Culture (Academia Sinica), 1981).
  18. Further information on Brecht and China is in Kenneth D. Weisinger, "Brecht and Chinese Theater," *Tamkang Review* 6.2-7.1 (1975/76) 303-15; Anthony Tatlow and Tak-wai Wong, eds., *Brecht and East Asian Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 1982); and Renata Berg-Pan, *Brecht and China* (Bouvier Verlag, 1982).

