

# Victorian Historiography and the Image of China

By

Shu Yunzhong

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the image of China in 19th-century England, seen as a function of the changing values and emphases in Victorian historiography. The dominant image of China, perhaps of all Asia, is one of stagnation and "ahistory"--an image based at least in part on ignorance, and one which can have both positive and negative meanings, depending on the point of view of the beholder. Thinkers like Carlyle and Mill were influenced by St.-Simon's theory that history alternates between "critical" and "organic" periods: Carlyle, longing for the final "golden age" of an organic society in England, admired China for its rule by intellectual elite, a sign of the rational, government-imposed order and harmony of the organic stage; Mill, on the other hand, valued individual liberty above social order, and thought history may not be after all progressing (as in Carlyle's Hegelian thinking) toward a final goal. In Ruskin's (pro-Western) negative view of Chinese popular art and Wilde's (anti-conventional) attraction to Taoist "inaction," we find again that the British images of China are really self-images, conditioned by the changing social, philosophical and historiographical ideas and values of 19th-century British Society.

## KEY WORDS

(self-)image  
ahistory  
(historical) goal  
historiography  
St.-Simonism:  
critical/organic periods

stationary stagnation  
Taoist  
inaction  
distortion (of image)  
transformation

In *News from Nowhere* William Morris writes: "It is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people care much about history" (*Collected Works*, XVI, 30). The Victorian Age is such a turbulent period, marked by its obsession with history. In English literary circles, some men of letters--such as Macaulay and Carlyle--were chiefly known as historians. Others, though not professional historians, took great interest in history and had their own philosophies of history. Their times changed so rapidly and tremendously, however, that their studies of history, meticulous though they were, did not lead them to the vision of a predictable future as they had expected. Out of desperation, many of them resorted to "ahistory" for help. They found such an example of "ahistory" in China. Their attitude was succinctly and unequivocally epitomized by Lord Tennyson:

Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep  
 into the younger day;  
 Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle  
 of Cathay.  
 ("Locksley Hall" (1842), 183-4)

The mummification of China, as implied in the above lines, sheds some light on a crucial aspect of the Victorian mentality--the dilemma caused by the Victorian conception of history and its loss of any ultimate historical goal.

Before we study the images of China in Victorian literature we should realize that, as none of the major Victorian writers were professional sinologists, they all got their ideas about China from other writers. It is necessary to start our study by briefly acquainting ourselves with the state of sinology of that time.

The first thing we notice is that even professional sinology remained in a disappointing state in the nineteenth century. Though the discipline had begun as early as 1825 in England, sinologists' attention had been chiefly focused on the Chinese language or the classics. As a result of their narrow philological interests, they attracted little attention from the general reading public. The same was more or less true in the other major European countries and the United States.

The information obtained by the general public about China was, thus, mainly supplied by amateurs--merchants and missionaries; in England's case mostly Protestant missionaries. Many of these writers, for various reasons,

painted a rather dark picture of China, accusing the Chinese people of indulging in various crimes. Many writers were nevertheless interested in Chinese culture, and they published many books on it. These books, according to Keith L. Pratt, included J. F. Davis's *The Chinese* (1836) and *Sketches of China* (1841), George T. Lay's *The Chinese as They Are* (1841), Abbé Huc's influential *The Chinese Empire* (1855), W. C. Milne's *Life in China* (1861) and the Rev. Justus Doolittle's *Social Life of the Chinese* (1865). Although these books were written chiefly for the entertainment rather than the instruction of the English people, sometimes favorable accounts of China or the Chinese could be found in them which served to counterbalance the anti-China propagandists. As a result, the picture of China in the Victorian Age seemed to some extent variegated, though it was by and large dominated by negativity.

Another phenomenon worth noting is that, unlike the general public who were interested in exotic Chinese customs and manners, the European intellectual circles were chiefly interested in Chinese history. However, their knowledge in this field was grotesquely distorted because, as pointed out by Wolfgang Franke in *China and the West*, the only source for the knowledge of Chinese history in the nineteenth century as the lengthy work published from 1777 to 1783 by the Jesuit father De Mailla, *Histoire generale de la Chine*. It was a free redaction of a Chinese work of the 12th century, which was in fact an evaluation of historical events on the basis of the Confucian doctrine. This work was bound to give Europeans the impression that everything in China had remained unchanged since the very beginning of history. From Herder and Hegel, many European writers of the nineteenth century shared this view.

Acquainted with these circumstances, let us start our study of the images of China in Victorian literature with Thomas Babington Macaulay, generally considered to be the "first" major Victorian writer. As a member of Parliament, he delivered a speech to the House of Commons on April 7th, 1840 concerning the war with China. In that speech, he admitted England's ignorance of China. He himself was an example of this ignorance. In his essay "Lord Bacon" (1837), he writes:

We speak of the invention of Gunpowder and of the invention of printing. The dates of both are unknown. The authors of both are unknown. Nor was this because men were too rude and ignorant to value intellectual superiority. The inventor of gunpowder appears to have been contemporary with Petrarch and Boccaccio. The inventor of printing was certainly contemporary with

Nicholas the Fifth, with Cosmo de' Medici, and with a crowd of distinguished scholars.  
 (*Prose of the Victorian Period*, ed. William E. Buckler, p. 42-3)

In fact as early as in 1590 it had been mentioned, in a book entitled *An Excellent Treatise of the Kingdom of China*, that "gunnes" and the art of printing were first invented in China. Then in the early seventeenth century the same information was repeated in Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World* (1614) and in the 1625 edition of Bacon's *Essays*. Here Macaulay seems to be beguiled by his bias for European civilization, and forgets to pay tribute to a foreign culture. Aside from his obvious ignorance, another point we notice in this passage is that to him neither gunpowder nor printing could have been invented in isolation. Associated with Petrarch, Boccaccio, Nicholas the Fifth and Medici, both arose out of propitious historical circumstances or milieus. This concept of "circumstances," by which he means that historical phenomena are products of the social, political institution and moral and cultural climate of the time, is of central importance in Macaulay's historiography. On the part of the historian, this concept demands that he must be conversant with the specific moment of a specific country he is writing about. Keeping this demand in mind, perhaps we should not expect Macaulay to attribute, in his historiography, the tremendously significant inventions of gunpowder and printing to China with which he was not familiar.

Thomas Carlyle was not so ignorant of China as Macaulay was, though he admitted he could not arrive at clearness when writing about it. In *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), Carlyle has a laudatory attitude toward China because he conceives of China as a place where "they do attempt to make their Men of Letters the Governors!" After enthusiastically praising the wonderful Chinese system for the search of talent, he goes on to say:

The man of intellect at the top of affairs: this is the aim of all constitutions and revolutions, if they have any aim . . . Get him for governor, all is got; fail to get him, though you had Constitutions plentiful as blackberries and a Parliament in every village, there is nothing yet got!  
 (*On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), *Complete Works*, I, 392)

To Carlyle the reign of intellect in China is not only embodied in politics but also in religion, which he calls "Practical Hero-worship" and holds to be the ultimate result of all religion. He believes that, instead of adhering to

sectarian doctrines, the Chinese "Emperor-Pontiff" abided by certain laws of heaven. As a result,

The Heavens, to a certain extent, do appear to countenance him. These three hundred millions actually make porcelain, souchong tea, with innumerable other things; and fight, under Heaven's flag, against Necessity;--and have fewer Seven-Years Wars, Thirty-Years Wars, French-Revolution Wars, and infernal fightings with each other, than certain millions elsewhere have!  
(*Past and Present* (1843), *Complete Works*, XII, 227-8)

Carlyle's panegyric of China seems to stem from his belief in the Saint-Simonian philosophy of history. According to Saint-Simon, history consists of alternating "organic" and "critical" periods; the former are those dominated by a single unified philosophy or religion and manifest themselves in a coherent social system whereas the latter are those that lack overarching authority and, as a result, are marked by social fragmentation. Though Carlyle was fully aware that he lived in a "critical" period, he did not give up his faith in the arrival of the "organic" period until shortly before his death in 1881. To him this Golden Age not only lay, temporally, in the future but also, geographically, in China, incarnated by the Chinese hierarchy of merit and intellect. Undoubtedly this is an illusion caused by his myth of history.

At roughly the same time, Carlyle's Saint-Simonian fellow traveller John Stuart Mill held a diametrically opposite view on China. In "Guizot's Essays and Lectures on History" (1845) Mill criticizes the Chinese government for its lack of any checking power, a political lacuna that has resulted in a dark despotism. In *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) Mill states that the Chinese lack the desire to accumulate capital. In a newspaper article entitled "Bain's on the Applications of Science to Human Health and Well-being" published in *Examiner* on September 2, 1848 he concludes that the Chinese only have unassisted reason and can not use analytical methods to distinguish different properties of various objects in the world. In addition to these political, economic and epistemological factors that he believes to have contributed to the stationariness of China, he proposes, in a letter to Auguste Comte, Saint-Simon's chief disciple, that the Chinese way of entrusting the intelligentsia with political power, the very thing Carlyle praises China for, has also played a significant role in China's stagnation:

Outre l'alteration grave que la  
suprematie politique ne tarderait pas a

produire dans les habitudes morales et intellectuelles de la classe speculative, il me semble que cette domination ne serait nullement favorable au progres intellectuel, en vue duquel, sans doute, elle a été surtout revée. Je trouve dans l'exemple de la Chine un grand appui a cette opinion. Dans ce pays-la, la constitution du gouvernement se rapproche autant peutetre que cela se peut, du principe saint-simonien, et qu'est-ce qui en est résulté? le gouvernement le plus opposé de tous à toute sorte de progres. La majorité d'une classe lettrée quelconque est peutêtre moins disposée que celle de toute autre classe, a se laisser mener par les intelligences les plus développées qui s'y recontrent; et comme cette majorité ne pourrait, sans doute, se composer de grands penseurs, mais simplement d'erudits, ou de savans sans veritable originalité, il ne pourrait en resulter que ce qu'on voit dans la Chine, c'est à dire une pedantocratie. (Letter to Auguste Comte, 25 fevrier 1842, *Collected Works*, XIII, 502)

It is interesting to note that when Mill reads, in the same year, the fifth and sixth volumes of Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* in which Comte works out in detail his scheme of history, the only thing he can not tolerate, in spite of his tremendous admiration for the book, is the monolithic intellectual tyranny which Comte constructs in the last historical stage. Eleven years Carlyle's junior and with a quite different upbringing, Mill never looked forward to the Saint-Simonian "organic" period so longingly as Carlyle did. Instead, he realized that in an organic society the individual might face the danger of being overwhelmed by the majority. To him, individual liberty was much more important than any sort of domineering social hierarchy. In order to protect individual liberty, he went so far as to say, in his famous essay "On Liberty" (1859), that the prohibition of the importation of opium into China was equivalent to interference with liberty:

These interferences are objectionable, not as infringements on the liberty of the producer or seller, but on that of the buyer. (*Collected Works*, XVIII, 293)

This laissez-faire attitude belies Mill's belief in Saint-Simonism. Instead of culminating in the sort of elitism espoused by Saint-Simon, the progress of history becomes an open question in Mill's mind.

Still more aware of the same open question, Matthew

Arnold suggests that the English should seek a solution to the question with the help of their critical faculty. Arnold does not use the word "China" in his poetry. China, as a "stationary" country, is not an appropriate topic for poetry, which Arnold believes to be an expression of human actions. However, Arnold, in his capacity of inspector of schools, does touch upon China in his prose several times. The feasibility of the Chinese examination system in England, especially in the civil service, had long been a hotly debated subject. Unlike Carlyle, who was convinced of the value of the examination system and very enthusiastic about its introduction into British politics, Arnold was opposed to its extensive use in education for fear that it might result in a mass of State-mechanism and stifle individuality. In this debate, Arnold tries to invalidate completely his opponents' arguments by using China's "stagnation" to prove the inadequacy of the examination system even in its native country:

The English people has all the qualities which dispose a people to work individually; may it never lose them! A people without the salt of these qualities, relying wholly on mutual co-operation, and proposing to itself second-rate ideals, would arrive at the pettiness and stationariness of China. (*The Popular Education of France* (1861), *Complete Prose Works*, II, 13)

In the late 1850s and early 1860s Arnold believed the danger posed to England by the French Revolution to have disappeared and that England was about to enter an "epoch of expansion." Now the English people should keep their minds open and flexible, employing their critical faculty to create a new world view. If they failed to do this, history would threaten to relapse into a mechanical "childhood without innocence," a state to which Arnold reduces the Chinese in order to show the damage done to their critical faculty by their examination system.

As we have seen in the discussion of Mill and Arnold above, the same idea about China might be expressed with different emphases, due to the existence of differing perspectives and interests. Yet another perspective was added by John Ruskin, to whom the "pettiness" and "stagnancy" of China were mainly embodied by what he conceived of as the lack of intellect in its art. This belief was the direct result of his identity as an art critic and, more significantly, a result of his central doctrine that art should be the union of sensuality and intellect as it had been in the Middle Ages. Before we study Ruskin's opinions on Chinese art, we should realize that he was sympathetic with the Chinese on a "humanistic"

level. Opposed to Britain's wars with China, he concludes expressly, in a letter, that "our wars in China and Japan are not likely to furnish good subjects for historical pictures" (*Complete Works*, XVIII, 547). The same idea could also be found in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). When he read in the newspaper that some innocent Chinese were brutally lynched in California he also felt indignant. But in spite of his humanistic sympathy with the Chinese, he has a very low opinion of their art, chiefly because, its attention is focused on what seemed to him to be sensuality. As a knowledgeable art critic, Ruskin deals with Chinese art quite extensively in his writings, ranging from architecture, sculpture, painting, design to enamel, though in a sporadic manner. But whatever topics he touches upon, he concludes rashly that the works "are absurd in their first steps" (*The Stones of Venice*, *Complete Works*, IX, 450) and that "their chief charm is, to the European eye, that of strangeness" (*The Stones of Venice*, *Complete Works*, IX, 183). Discussing the undercutting in sculpture that expressed the sculptor's desire, he told his listeners in a lecture delivered in December 1870:

The extreme of vulgarity is usually reached when the entire bas-relief is cut hollow underneath, as in much Indian and Chinese work, so as to relieve its forms against an absolute darkness; but no formal law can ever be given; for exactly the same thing may be beautifully done for a wise purpose, by one person, which is basely done, and to no purpose, or to a bad one, by another. Thus, the desire for emphasis itself may be the craving of a deadened imagination, or the passion of a vigorous one; and relief against shadow may be sought by one man only for sensation, and by another, for intelligibility.  
(*Aratra Pentelici*, *Complete Works*, XX, 322)

Like this one, most of Ruskin's other judgment on Chinese art are problematic because he fails, or rather disdains, to explain why the same elements could be regarded as wholesome in European art but marked simultaneously as defective in Chinese art. Ruskin also seems to have forgotten, when passing these scathing judgments on Chinese art, that much of the popular chinoiserie artwork was actually produced, not in China, but in England and other European countries. The defects he detects in this artwork suggest that problems exist in European taste rather than in Chinese art. Confronted with Chinese art, Victorian moralist historiography stumbles and loses its usually sure footing.

Starting from the 1870s English historiography underwent a tremendous change, which can be summed up with two words: "amoralization" and "Professionalization." Historians switched their attention from the synthesis of history to the study of facts. This change, among other things, caused historians to study China more carefully. As a result, more and more books about China were published, ranging from serious scholarly translations of Chinese classics to miscellaneous remarks and desultory notes. While the historians devoted themselves to the study of facts, some men of letters seemed to have gone a step further by showing the involvement of subjectivity in the presentation of facts. To them any image, instead of being a true representation, was a joint creation whose value was determined by the viewer rather than by the viewed. Oscar Wilde is typical of these men of letters.

As in many other aspects, Wilde showed his self-awareness when dealing with things Chinese. According to the famous anecdote, he was gazing ecstatically at some rare Chinese porcelain in his Magdalen dormitory when he told his visitors gravely that he was trying to live up to his blue china. One suspects that Wilde, like Narcissus watching his own image in the river, was encountering his own image in front of the blue china, because at other times he seems to echo the opinions of Ruskin, the Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. Like his professor, Wilde revealed his inability to appreciate Chinese art. When visiting San Francisco harbour on his American lecture tour in 1882, he reportedly made the following remarks:

Speaking of Chinese art, he [Wilde] said that it possesses no element of beauty, the horrible and grotesque appearing to be standards of perfection. 'Their art and music,' he said, 'are an extraordinary development in Japanese art but nothing of excellence in Chinese art. When I was a lad I heard a Chinese fiddle, or so called, at the Paris Exposition, but I could discern no music in it.'

(Quote from *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. E. H. Mikhail, P. 63)

As time passed, Wilde became more and more willing to associate himself with the Chinese. In the eleventh and sixteenth chapters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Wilde twice hints that Dorian Gray has gone to one of the opium dens in London's Chinatown. Wilde seems to be attracted by China's inaction much more than he is by its immorality. On February 8, 1890 he published "A Chinese Sage," a lengthy book review on the famous sinologist Herbert A. Giles' translation of the works of Chuang Tzu, the Chinese Taoist patriarch. To Wilde "Chuang Tzu may be

said to have summed up in himself almost every mood of European metaphysical or mystical thought, from Heraclitus down to Hegel" because he "spent his life in preaching the great creed of Inaction, and in pointing out the uselessness of all useful thing" (Quotation from *Reviews by Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross, P. 529). In the review he suggests that Chuang Tzu would have protested against anything associated with the English middle class, including materialism, moralism, egotism and altruism. His description is so enthusiastic that one is convinced that Wilde is describing himself rather than the Chinese sage. As Masolino D'Amico tells us, Wilde found in Chuang Tzu a kindred spirit and perhaps the first model for his own social essays. Wilde's adherence to the doctrine of Inaction indicates, among other things, that the future has lost its weight and attraction for him. Though one may argue that China still appears stagnant to Wilde, his bias in favor of the "stagnancy" indicates a definite transformation of the presiding Victorian views of China.

By now we notice that, except in the case of Carlyle, China was presented as an image of stagnation by all the major Victorian writers to whom we have referred. Undoubtedly, the *raison d'être* for this literary phenomenon could be partly found in the fact that most European intellectuals of the time got their ideas about factors such as Victorian complacency, belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, religious hostility towards pagans and emotional reaction against vulgar chinoiserie artwork. But Carlyle's image still remains to be explained, for Carlyle, besides perhaps getting his information about China from the same sources as the others did, did in fact possess the traits listed above. He presented, nevertheless, an entirely different image of China. Tackling this problem, we encounter an even more crucial factor that contributes to the formation and sustenance of these images. This factor is the Victorian conception of history. Heavily influenced by German idealist philosophy, Carlyle, for most of his literary career, had an ultimate goal for history--the reign of intellect--that enabled him to pose China as a model for Europe. His contemporaries did not and could not have had comparable goals. The loss of any historical goal, together with many other factors, transformed these writers into either overt or covert lovers of the imperfect. Despite this factor, they still conceived of history as a unilinear process inevitably oriented towards the future. The crisis caused by the clash between their conception of history and the loss of historical direction made them all the more anxious to pose an image of stagnation in order to goad themselves forward. This negative example had to be set in such a remote country like China because, considering the cultural links among England, Europe and America, setting up such an image either in Europe or in America would entail denying England the potential for historical progress. In

fact, some of these writers, Ruskin for instance, tended to lump the entire East together as an image of "stagnation." When the unilinear historical process was discredited, as in Wilde's case, the anxiety for a negative image of stagnation disappeared and, as a result, the image of China began to change in its value, if not its appearance. The vicissitudes of this image reflect the changes in the Victorian mentality. It goes without saying that as long as the kaleidoscope of history is turned, this image will assume different shapes.

## NOTES

1. See A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) and Peter Allan Dale, *the Victorian Critic and the Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## Primary Sources:

1. *Prose of the Victorian Period*. Ed. William E. Buckler. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958.
2. *The Works of Lord Macaulay*. Ed. Lady Trevelyan. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871.
3. *Carlyle's Complete Works*. The Sterling Edition. Boston: Estes and Lauriat, [1885?]
4. *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*. Ed. F. E. L. Priestley. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.
5. *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. R. H. Super. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960.
6. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Library Edition. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. London: George Allen, 1903.
7. *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Robert Ross. London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1969.

## Secondary Sources:

- Appleton, William W. *A Cycle of Cathay*. New York: Columbia UP, 1951.
- Ch'en, Yao-sheng & Paul S. Y. Hsiao. *Sinology in the United Kingdom and Germany*. Occasional Papers of Research

- Publications and Translations. Institute of Advanced Projects, East-West Center, Honolulu, 1967.
- Culler, A. Dwight. *The Victorian Mirror of History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.
- Dale, Peter Allan. *The Victorian Critic and the Idea of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977.
- Dawson, Raymond. *The Chinese Chameleon*. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Forbes, Duncan. "Historismus in England," *Cambridge Journal*. 4 (1954): 387-400.
- Franke, Wolfgang. *China and the West*. Trans. R. A. Wilson. Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 1967.
- Harrison, Frederic. *The Meaning of History*. New York: Macmillan, 1900.
- Jann, Rosemary. *The Art and Science of Victorian History*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State UP, 1985.
- Pratt, Keith L. *Visitors to China*. New York: Praeger, 1968.
- Tao, C. Y. & Sung Shee. *Sinology in Japan and the United States*. Occasional Papers of Research Translations. Institute of Advanced Projects, East-West Center, Honolulu, 1966.