



## How to Evaluate Post-Colonialism Theory: Introspection of Chinese Traditional Culture Under Post-Colonial Perspective

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### Abstract

Post-colonialism theory had played an important role in challenging western supremacy and advocating equal dialogue between First World and Third World. This paper has elaborated the problems such as method, nature, content and the origin of postcolonial theory from the angle of dynamic development. At the same time, the paper discusses Chinese images under the influence of post-colonialism theory. Finally, the author offers the strategy on how China deals with western culture hegemony and gives a new visual angle to culture hegemony study, thus reconstruct Chinese traditional culture.

**Key words:** Post-colonialism; Chinese Traditional Culture; Evaluate

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### INTRODUCTION

Post-colonialism rose at the end of 1970s and is the theoretical discourse gradually pushed to the front stage of academics following post-modernism. With representative theoreticians in different periods as latitude

and the course of development as longitude, this paper has elaborated the problems such as method, nature, content and the origin of post-colonialism theory from the angle of dynamic development. As the early representative of post-colonialism, Fanon opens culture visual angel to criticize colonialism. He thinks that the white dominance, cultural aggression and racial discrimination brought by colonial dominance give blacks especially the black intellectuals serious cultural alienation, and there are astonishing psychological wound and twisted psychology that is hard to speak in their hearts, so he puts forward struggle strategy on colonialism. Frankfurt school cultural industrial criticism thinks: Cultural industry satisfies the needs of “the masses” controlled by commercial strength, and people are taking amusement pastime as purpose and lost the essence as art negate and surmount spirit, artistic skill relies on mechanical technology, and has no artistic value. Therefore, Post-colonialism theory mainly studies the cultural discourse power relation between former suzerains and former colonies, as well as the new issues relating to racialism, cultural imperialism, national culture, cultural power identity preceded by the ending of direct colonial rule period (Homi Bhabha, 1983). As we know, culture has the feature of ideology. Ideology can help to form different class and group, and has the function of imagining, writing and depicting. The second feature is the double construction of “other”. The “other” is a very important concept in the theory of post-colonialism. It comes from the philosophy of Hegel and that of Sartre. The culture identity of “other” is actually a double construction process, which originated from the influence of the Western centralism and from the “other” of non-western culture’s participation, like China. Therefore, we should emphasize an equality dialogue attitude for the communication and development of both sides. As a non-mainstream minority discourse power, it is a motion from edge to the center, aiming at clearing up “Western centralism”, and thus carries strong hue of cultural and

political criticism. This discourse is managed by some theorists who are born with the blood lineage and cultural background from the third world. Among them, Edward W Said, the influence from the scholar of Palestinian descent, Gayer Chakravorty Spivak, the female scholar of Asian-Indian descent, and Homi F Bhabha of a more mixed cultural identity, known as “the three masters”, is the most intensive.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

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The Orientalism written by Said in 1978 is considered as a pioneering work of the field of post-colonial theory, which does not only shake Western academic circles but also influence countries for the third world. With the help of Michel Foucault's power discourse theory, Said provided new interpretation to the new “Orientalism”, as a discipline, and discerned the ideological meaning beyond its function as a “discipline”. Orientalism is deemed as an essentialism way of thinking with a hint of dualistic opposition of the east and the west. In short, the orient is not the orient of the oriental but is the one constructed, imagined and demonized under the domination of western power. On one hand, the orient is considered barbaric, backward, dirty and lazy; on the other hand, the orient is also full of mysterious exotic atmosphere. The orient of neither sense is an authentic existence, but is thoroughly constructed by westerners. Orientalism is in essence a “means that the west relies on to control, rebuild and reign the orient”. Said's post-colonialism criticism is just established based on the critique of the thinking way of dualistic opposition of the east and the west hidden in manifest Orientalism. Besides, the criticism inherits the legacy of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony thought. Said expends the core of Gramsci's theory and carries out the analyses and disclosure of cultural hegemonism by entering from such perspectives as the joint scheme of culture and power, the forms of cultural participation imperialism causes, and the function of culture in imperialist expansion. The concept of “culture” in Said's view is inseparable from “imperialism”. The so-called imperialism is denoting “the practice, theory and attitude of a dominating suzerain center dictating a distant territory”.

Among contemporary post-colonial critics, Spivak has an influence immediately inferior to that of Said's, and Spivak's theory route is heterogeneous and variable. As for the scholar's academic career, the editor of *The Spivak Reader* summaries as follows:

Her career has followed a complex intellectual trajectory through a deeply feminist perspective on deconstruction, the Marxist critique of capital and the international division of labor, the critique of imperialism and colonial discourse, and the critique of race in relation to nationality, ethnicity, the status of the migrant, and what it might mean to identify a nation or a cultural form as post-colonial in a

neocolonial world(Donna, Gerald, 1996).

No wonder some western scholars call her “a Marxist deconstruction activist of feminism”. Homi Bhabha is one of the youngest and most vigorous in contemporary post-colonial theory criticism group. Though his writings are not large in number, the one of the most importance in his publications is his monograph *The Location of Culture* 1994, and the paper collection *Nation and Narration* 1990 compiled earlier. However, Bhabha's theory writings open up a broader field of theory vision and space of exploration for the scholars engaged in the studies of post-colony theory. Although the theories of the said “three masters” lay different emphases, they all belong to post-structuralism school in general. Moreover, if post-colonialism is classified in accordance with theoretical dividing line, there is also the feminism school paying close attention to the conditions of women from the third world, represented by Manoranjan Mohanty, as well as the Marxism school, represented by Ahamd. Nevertheless, seen from the degree of concerning in the aspect of discourse weight and educational circles, the latter two schools are not sufficient to form “a situation of tripartite confrontation” with post-structuralism school. However, the existence of these schools speaks volumes for the multiplicity of the dimensions discussed in post-colonial theory. Therefore, it is easy for us to understand the uncertainty of the concept of post-colonialism and the broadness and complexness of the subject studied. According to Jonathan Hart's opinions, post-colonial theory discourse denotes a very complicated theory study of “the difference between European imperialist powers and their former colonies culturally, politically and historically (including the difference among races) (Jonathan Hart, 1994).”

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## 2. DISCUSSION

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Postcolonial theory had played an important role in challenging western supremacy and advocating equal dialogue between First World and Third World. The system of western colonial discourse is going along with western colonial expansion, European centralism; western advanced idea and WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) etc. are the important content of colonial discourse. Western colonialists regard the people in colony as “other” without the ability of thinking and self consciousness; they often measure Eastern people with the Western measure of value as: original, backward, ignorant, dirty, etc. This kind of eastern visual angle is the production of cultural hegemony; it has deep background of colonial aggression and expansion. Take China as an example, China is a developing country, it is also a socialist country, it has become the main target of culture infiltration and subversion carried by western great nations, because of relatively obvious bifurcation such as culture, ideology, social system and national benefit. This had decided that

China will inevitably be faced with stern cultural safe challenge in new century. So no doubt it is easy for China to be accepted as different culture. No matter how Chinese images in the western eyes are positive or negative, it is not the truth about Chinese images, it is adulterated imaginary composition, and it is the production of western desire and fear. In global times, the domestic scholars first affirmed its positive significance when they admitted it: post-colonial theory criticized long-standing “European centrism” or “west-centrism” on the aspect of politics and culture from the perspective of “the other” (the East), and emphasized the movement from edge to center and aimed at eliminating so-called center of consciousness in the end. However, at the same time, people also keenly saw the internal contradictions and defects in the postcolonial discourse. Questions mainly focused on three following points: non-representative critical subject, rational discourse and cultural determinism. According to the challenges to the subject and discourse, as Wang Ning said, “they had to face such a dilemma: since they lived in the west, they had to use English in a direct or indirect way to write their own personal experience so that they could achieve success by the means that Westerners identified; However, since they lived in a society with the characteristics of multiculturalism, they had to stand on the ground of the east or Third World to speak in its unique way. Thus their political orientation tended to be particularly complicated and swing, then their criticism about cultural hegemony of First World failed to represent the interests of intellectuals from the East or Third World”. The western dominant postcolonial theorists “didn’t use the theory of Oriental culture to deconstruct the west rather than had the aid of theory weapon of western thinkers to complete their criticism. This discourse itself disproved the dominance of western culture.”

Although some scholars thought that the imported “exotic variety” was not suitable for China’s cultural soil. However, western postcolonial theory had a strong practicality and operability. In particular, it was just echoed by the appeals of “Advocating Traditional Chinese” and “Restore Tradition” in the 1990s and even the present because it still had some localization tendency and stood on a nationalist stance, which was definitely a great temptation to Chinese scholars who wanted to fight a culture war but suffer from no weapons. What initially became to shell object was the so-called Chinese old customs works directed by Zhang Yimou and other fifth generation of directors. Some scholars made such a comparison between Zhang Yimou films that gained a huge success in the west and Conrad’s “heart of darkness”. They had similar success logic, that is, these works “were trying to place the subject dabbled in prehistoric aesthetic consciousness and psychological structure to convert into a myth and fantasy—however, from the literary criticism of colonialism and post-colonialism, prehistoric aesthetic consciousness actually showed wild and ugliness

to modern and postmodern civilized men to meet their psychology of seeking novelty”. Some early showed such anxiety and evaluate that Zhang Yimou was obsessed with showing a secret and marginal east in order to cater to the taste of westerners, meeting their otherness consuming desires, then results into Chinese local culture pays great price. In recent years, on the ground of local post-colonial criticism, the voice against radical cultural nationalism has still been heard. However, we could hear new thoughts from it. So to speak, it tends to be more rational and soft, and can constructively put forward the strategy to cultural conservatism. Wang Ning mentioned in his recent writings “global localization” and in view of this concept he rehashed the dream of China “non-marginalization” and “return to the center” and thought that new Confucianism should be able to assume such a responsibility and become postcolonial discourse of global localization in the Oriental context. At this time, the reconstruction of Confucianism has new significance. The so-called “new Confucianism” is the criticism, sublation and reform of traditional Confucianism. It is able to be a representative discourse power of equal dialogue with the west in our multicultural coexistence pattern.

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## CONCLUSION

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In the language of postcolonial language, Center and Margin or Peripheral makes up an important geographical concept, and also a cultural, political, economic, ideological and psychological one. The Europe-and-American-centrism labels the Western politics, economy, culture and ideology with “universal values” on behalf of the world, therefore what is non-Western in terms of politics, economy, culture and ideology becomes local and marginal. It is obvious the so-called effect of “marginalized” is a fruit of Westernization, and this situation could be proved in a global perspective. Contemporary media more often than not launches discussion of “mainstream culture” as well as “how to integrate into the mainstream culture”, which are generally based on the assumption that the marginal culture is backward and worthless, therefore not worthy of preservation and continuity, and should be discarded. In the backdrop of today’s cultural ecology increasingly affected by the postcolonial theory, the interaction of margin and center will definitely be more frequently than ever before. Forced by the dominant western culture, people in third world countries, especially the intellectuals are beginning to rethink the “Westernization” and the universality of the western discourse. Globalization and post-colonialism were two trends developing at the same time in two different areas and levels, and had no absolute comparability as the former related to economy and politics and the latter relevant to ideology and culture. However, as said above, globalization as well includes cultural expansion and interactive ingredients

while the post-colonialism also related closely to the economic independence and the political and ideological changes, thus we can still research and study the two in a combined way in a certain sense. From a geopolitical point of view, globalization can be described as an expansion from the “center” to the “margin” while the post-colonialism moves contrarily from the “edge” to the “center”<sup>8</sup>. Thinking about the development of the Chinese culture in this background ay clarifies some pictures that are originally not very clear. The problem lies in that in the process of cultural colonialism and modernization, if we fails to maintain the our own national culture characteristics, China’s traditional culture will be soon altered and reintegrated by the western force, followed by our lost our spiritual root and the sense of belonging, left behind ourselves becoming spiritual homeless. The discussion of the traditional Chinese culture in the context of today’s culture colonialism casts its vital significance in transforming and reconstructing our culture tradition to explore the possibility of its renewal and innovation, to promote the modernization of the traditional academic tradition, and to bring a broader prospects and development space for the traditional culture in nowadays. If we just take Western standards as ours, taking the initiative to be marginalized and meeting the Western integration, following the Western cultural development paths as clues, then our culture is bound to give our share to the global cultural homogenization, making our culture separated from our its own characteristics, making us incorporated into the Western cultural system and creating a cultural colony. Therefore, how to save and develop our culture is the among both the modernization requirements and the anti-westernized requirements, and this being one of the most sensitive and most complex topics of contemporary Chinese culture and an extension of the post-colonial issues, embodies the contemporary cultural development. For this reason, “affirming the value of Chinese culture and emphasizing its heterogeneity” are of great importance to processing the relations between tradition and modern, to counteracting the homogenization of Western cultural values, and to guiding development

of contemporary Chinese culture. Careful analysis of and treatment to this social cultural phenomenon and correspondingly giving appropriate response and reaction, are issues in contemporary Chinese culture of great importance. Looking forward to the future, we are required to deeply understand the ideological content of the traditional Chinese culture, extracting wherefrom the theoretical ideas meaningful for today and forming the contemporary cultural strategy, in order to press forward in the face of difficulties, to maintain our national cultural uniqueness and to carry forward the outstanding traditions of Chinese culture and promote the new developments and renovations of Chinese culture in the future.

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