

Another China: An Analysis of Joseph Conrad's Way of Naming China and Chinese

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Abstract

Joseph Conrad gains his worldwide fame for his vivid description of exotic life because of his sailor's life, most of whose works are about sea and oversea life. Therefore, there are many shadows of foreign countries and peoples, including China and Chinese people. Through the text analysis of Conrad's way of presenting China and naming Chinese people, this paper reveals the prejudice that the image of China in his stories is vague and remote; the image of Chinese is portrayed as distorted and inferior. China as a cultural otherness reflects Conrad's sense of superiority over other nations.

Key words: Naming; The image of China and Chinese; Sense of superiority

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INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad is a hot-discussed writer in China. Although he does not give so much concern for China and Chinese people, there are still some locations of China mentioned and some minor Chinese characters in his works. In E. W. Said's *Orientalism*, he declares: "There

were — and are — cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West." (Zhu, ed., 2001, p.299) China belongs to the Far East, which is considered as "the Other" to the West. Writing concerned with China and Chinese is the projected image as "the Other" and represents the inferiority of non-European civilization. In Conrad's case, the geographical settings in his stories are in the East, but these locations are not clearly and correctly described; yellow Chinese people are always the minor roles or just some shadows with no names.

1. THE IMAGE OF GEOGRAPHICAL CHINA

In the short story *Because of the Dollors*, there mentions one concrete place in China — "And it's a fact that he had been kicked, horsewhipped, imprisoned, and hounded with ignominy out of pretty well every place between Ceylon and Shanghai, for a professional blackmailer."¹ Shanghai here is depicted as a harbor for the white villain. If people find one place for security, he may pick up one from the following two choices: one is that this place is politically provided to the refugees; the other possibility is that such place must be remote or underdevelopment. The white villain chooses "every place between Ceylon and Shanghai" to be a professional blackmailer. Actually, it is the place chosen by Conrad and it is not hard to infer that in Conrad's mind such place is far away, backward, and full of violence, because it is commonly considered that the most dangerous place is the safest one. As a whole, "China" is mentioned twice in this short story.

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Because of the Dollors*. It is one piece from the collection *Within the Tides*, London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995. This piece is picked on the website. Retrieved from <http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/2498/>

He saw all that lot of dollars melted into bars and disposed of somewhere on the **China** coast. (Conrad, *Because of Dollars*)

So Laughing Anne's boy will lead a saintly life in **China** somewhere; he may even become a martyr; but poor Davidson is left out in the cold. (Conrad, *Because of Dollars*)

As what indicated above, the white protagonist, Davidson knows that the hidden place for dollar bars is not a place where these villains are quite familiar but a wild and vague place, "on the China coast", because this place is remote and far away. At the end of the story, the writer describes that the "boy will lead a saintly life in China" —not because China is a fairyland but because it is a wild and vague place where a pathetic small potato as Laughing Anne's son can find his way out. Another word drawing our attention is "somewhere" which appears in both these two sentences, and this indefinite pronoun corresponds with the implied meaning that China is indeed a wild and vague place in the writer's mind. In the proceeding line of the second sentence, Conrad emphasizes that the boy "may even become a martyr". Although many western missionaries came to China with the intention to cultivate the ignorant Chinese people in history, it is worth of doubt here how could this little boy who even cannot control his own life, represent God to educate Chinese people? Therefore, it might be in Conrad's mind that a westerner whether he is an adult or even a little boy or whether this boy has received good education, is more civilized than Chinese people and thus he can cultivate the ignorant Chinese people. When Conrad mentions Eastern place or China, he has a habit of not telling the concrete place and likes to use word "somewhere" instead or a vague geographical conception like "Eastern ports" or "China ports":

Was there not **somewhere** between Australia and **China** a Whalley Island and a Condor Reef?

...and ends by recommending it warmly to sailing vessels leaving the **China ports** for the south in the months from December to April inclusive. (Conrad, *The End of the Tether*, 1966, p.103)

In Author's Note to *Typhoon and Other Stories*, Conrad mentions Fu-chau of China like this, "...when the instance of a steamship full of returning coolies from Singapore to **some port** in northern China occurred to my recollection." (p.142) However, in the novel Conrad clearly points out the destination is Fu-chau, not "some port in northern China". Furthermore, Fu-chau is located in southeast China not in northern China. Sherry notes that, as a result of his service on three ships, the *Palestine*, the *Vidar*, and the *Otago*, "Conrad became acquainted with 'three strictly limited geographical areas' that feature repeatedly in his fiction — Singapore, Borneo (especially its east coast, in the region of the river Berau), and Bangkok." (Page, 1986, p.45) He has never been to China. This funny geographical mistake shows that Conrad does not know geographical location of China at all. He may just hear of some ports

like Fu-chau from the coolies earning a life in Singapore and then dogmatically imagines the location of the place. According to the collective imagination, Conrad's case reflects that this dogmatically imagination of China is a common phenomenon in the West before westerners really know the correct geographical location, culture and history of China. Their communication with Chinese was too limited at that time but they still pretended that they knew much. Whether the uncertain word "somewhere" or the fanny mistake that Conrad makes, the conclusion is that he does not know the geographical range of China. Maybe he does not have such interest to make clear what the accurate locations are in his stories because he shows no such intention.

Being a sailor, Conrad has visited in many parts of the world, including those places in the Far East, such as many ports of the Indian Ocean, Borneo, and the Malay states. And his merchant seaman's experience is reflected throughout almost in all his works, particularly depicting the region now known as South-East Asia and the countries now known in Conrad's day as Siam, Malaya, Java, Sumatra and Borneo. Conrad himself tells us in the "Author's Note" to *Within the Tides* that:

His life during this period was 'far from being adventurous in itself' and 'not much charged with a feeling of romance'. Moreover, most of his time was inevitably spent in the loneliness of the ocean, and his experiences of life ashore must have been quite limited. For all that, brief glimpses and even second-hand gossip were enough to initiate a process that, years later, produced the novels and stories with an East setting. (Page, 1986, pp.44-45)

He first saw Singapore in 1883, after the Palestine had been abandoned (see *Youth*), and it is there, the busy port makes an appearance in *The End of the Tether* and elsewhere.

Of Conrad's brief visit to Bangkok at the beginning of 1888, Sherry adds that though 'extremely short ... it was to be almost as fruitful a source for his future fiction as was Berau'. Both *The Shadow-Line* and the remarkable short story *Falk* draw on the experiences of this time. (Page, 1986, p.45)

The setting of *Typhoon* is on a steamer sailing from Singapore to Fu-chau. The story in *Victory* happens on an inconsiderable isle in the South Seas. The narrator in *Falk* tells us that the story happens in a certain Eastern seaport and claims, "No more need be said of the place." (Conrad, *Falk*, 1981, p.259) What we know from the narration is that this place is "the capital of an Eastern kingdom". The setting of *Because of the Dollars* locates in a great Eastern port. All the settings are not the accurate places in these stories, which arouse readers' doubt about the reason why Conrad makes his stories happening in these vague places. There are probably three reasons: one is that Conrad's knowledge about the East is too limited; the second is that he looks down upon the East and disdains to make clear the correct locations; the third is that he thinks his readers (mostly, westerners) are not really interested in the East so

he considers it is unnecessary to write about the accurate places.

Though the settings are all set in some Eastern ports, the white settlers or even the native inhabitants in these places are also influenced by Orientalism. The wide influence of Orientalism can be seen from Said's statement:

Yet Orientalism reinforced, and was reinforced by, the certain knowledge that Europe or the West literally commanded the vastly greater part of the earth's surface. The period of immense advance in the institutions and content of Orientalism coincides exactly with the period of unparalleled European expansion; from 1815 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from about 35 percent of the earth's surface to about 85 percent of it. Every continent was affected, none more so than Africa and Asia. The two greatest empires were the British and the French. (1977, p.41)

Regarding Conrad, he is one of the representatives of the West and such influence can be observed in his stories. He once stayed in France for about three and a half years, and then serviced in British Merchant Navy and became a British subject as early as 1886. In such a historical context, he inevitably has the inclination of the idea analyzed in *Orientalism*. And even in the colonized or half-colonized countries, quite a part of people their self-consciously think the West is superior to the other nations and classify people according to their nations. We can find an obvious example in *Falk*, "The constable seemed to be on terms of scornful intimacy with Maltese, with Eurasians, with Chinamen, with Klings, and with the sweepers attached to a temple, with whom he talked at the gate." (Conrad, 1981, p.293) There are many similar examples in these stories which will not be listed out one by one here because that is out of focus. The intention here is to state that though the settings are arranged on the land of the East, but it is the foil to the West and dominated by the West at the level of ideology.

2. THE WAY OF NAMING CHINESE

In his stories concerned with Chinese, *Typhoon*, *Victory*, *The End of the Tether*, *Because of the Dollars*, *Falk: A Reminiscence*, there are no typical "Chinese names" to address Chinese people; instead, there exist the following names: Chinaman, China boy, Chink, Celestial, Joan. Conrad's way of naming Chinese reflects what the image of Chinese people looks like, and more significantly, his contemporaries' stereotype of naming Chinese people.

There was a popular story about Chinaman and the Chink.² It was told by a lecturer in Yale University, vividly showing the difference among Superman, Chinaman and Chink. Chinaman was distinct for its

inferiority to Superman. Superman (also White Man) was the real hero capable of everything like an almighty God, while Chinaman did nothing significant except building railroads, planting sugar in Hawaii, mining gold in California, did hand laundries everywhere and lying miles of stones like his ancestors, whose cost of labor was very cheap, two hours for a penny. When Superman and Chinaman fought against each other, Superman would always win by punching Chinaman to the moon without any effort because he could do everything a zillion times faster and better than Chinaman. The story went on as Chinaman had part of evil side, which even horrified most western people, known as the Chink. The Chink would rob jobs from white men because they were large in number and willing to do anything with less payment. They formed another threaten by marrying white men's sisters and producing little half-Chinks. They did evils as opening opium dens, gambling, and being whorehouses, and seducing the innocent youth of America to go to these places. Even badly, they behaved like monsters, eating rats, dogs and anything else that could be eaten. Chinaman had age limit as he could die when he was old or sick. However, the Chink kept alive forever and much stronger and more awful. They might take over everything that white men need to survive. They broke the rules, at all, plagiarized products, and did better in Math and Science.

The story reflects the pop consensus existing decades about the horrifying Chinese. Chinaman looked like a clown contrasted by the nation hero, Superman, and even worse, Chink is like a beast eating everything, robbing everything, seriously threatening the life of local people, but can never be expelled or killed. According to the dictionary³, Chinaman (1849) is an offensive term for a person of Chinese descent. In *Oxford Dictionary*, the original meaning of "Chinaman" dates back to 1772, referring to merchants who did business with china. An American linguist H.L. Menchen has studied the phrase "Chinaman's chance", and points out the American Chinese are antipathetic to this phrase because it is considered offensive. The phrase is coming with the California Gold Rush, also "dog's chance", means the slightest chance. This word implies a racial discrimination attitude towards Chinese people. Chink is an offensive slang used as a disparaging term for person of Chinese birth or descent. Among these names, Chinaman is the most frequent name used to call Chinese people in Conrad's stories; while Chink is used several times in *Victory* by the three villains to show their horror and disdainful emotion to Wang.

"China boy" is another common word in Conrad's stories, which refer to immigrant Chinese who works in hotels as an assistant or a waiter. Compared with "Chinaman" and "Chink", "China boy" is a neutral word

² David Oh, Yale University, March 31, 1998, Published online by *Racingmix*. Retrieved 2004, January 9 from <http://www.racingmix.com/word/chink.htm/>

³ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1983.

which gives the impression that this group of people is very young but has to earn their living by doing rather humble jobs because of their poverty and illiterate. Usually, they are mistreated by their master and the white customers:

He raved aloud. The **China boys** hung back with the dishes at the foot of the ladder. He yelled from the bridge down at the deck, "Aren't we going to have any chow this evening at all?" (Conrad, *The End of the Tether*, 1966, p.182)

The portable table was being put together for dinner to the left of the wheel by two **pig-tailed 'boys,'** who as usual snarled at each other over the job... (Conrad, *The End of the Tether*, 1966, p.190)

In the distant corner **the tired China boy** dozed on his heels, his back against the wall. (Conrad, *Victory*, 1921, p.104)

Not a soul was in sight, not even a **China boy** — nothing but a lot of painted iron chairs and tables. (Conrad, *Victory*, 1921, p.34)

All these description reveals what roles these China boys play in the so-called Eastern world. These boys may immigrate to these neighboring countries or were born there to struggle for a living. Usually they have no chance to receive any education and have to make a living from their childhood. So they may show their illiterate behaviors and have to be dropped on because of their low status. The next word is "Celestial" in the following examples: "Unfortunately, I have not succeeded with Wang," he said:

I failed to move his **Celestial** heart — that is, if there is such a thing. He told me with horrible Chinese reasonableness that he could not let us pass the barrier, because we should be pursued. He doesn't like fights. He gave me to understand that he would shoot me with my own revolver without any sort of compunction, rather than risk a rude and distasteful contest with the strange barbarians for my sake. He has preached to the villagers. They respect him. He is the most remarkable man they have ever seen, and their kinsman by marriage. They understand his policy. And anyway only women and children and a few old fellows are left in the village. This is the season when the men are away in trading vessels. But it would have been all the same. None of them have a taste for fighting — and with white men too! They are peaceable, kindly folk and would have seen me shot with extreme satisfaction. Wang seemed to think my insistence — for I insisted, you know, very stupid and tactless. But a drowning man clutches at straws. We were talking in such Malay as we are both equal to. (Conrad, *Victory*, 1921, p.325)

...She belonged to a portly Chinaman resembling a mandarin in a picture-book, with goggles and thin drooping moustaches, and as dignified as only a **Celestial** knows how to be. (Conrad, *Because of Dollars*)

...and every single **Celestial** of them was carrying with him all he had in the world — a wooden chest with a ringing lock and brass on the corners... (Conrad, *Typhoon*, 1981, p.154)

With every roll of the ship the long rows of sitting **Celestials** would sway forward brokenly, and her headlong dives knocked together the line of shaven polls from end to end. (Conrad, *Typhoon*, 1981, p.209)

"Celestial" is used either as a noun or an adjective in the text. The original meaning of it refers to a heavenly

being, a god or angel. Here, it apparently satirizes those Chinese characters in the stories. How does the word address Chinese? Due to the prosperous development of China's Tang Dynasty in the ancient time, this word is used specially to refer to China or Chinese people or something relating to the Chinese. Actually, this word shows the great power and reputation of ancient China. However, from the second half of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, China was no longer a powerful country and was invaded by many western Powers. Many Chinese people could not earn their living on their motherland. They had to move to western countries or to the neighboring countries such as Singapore, East Indies or Malay. It is not hard to imagine their low social position of these first or second immigrant generations oversea. Compared with Conrad's habitual way of calling Chinese "Chinaman", the name "Celestial" can reflect certain "nationality" of Chinese people as well as the satirical attitude of the writer. "Celestial" in the first example is an adjective that shows the distinctive nationality of Chinese people: In Heyst' words, it is "horrible Chinese reasonableness", which differs much from the western idea. "Celestial" in the second example is a noun ironically expressing how self-righteous that Chinese people are. The word "Celestial" in the last two examples is noun which is satirically used by Conrad to emphasize the awkward reaction of these "Chinamen" to the terrible natural disaster in contrasting to the bravery and imperturbability of the white protagonist, Captain MacWhirr.

"John" is an ordinary name in western countries. In terms of *Webster's Dictionary*, it originally refers to a Jewish prophet who according to Gospel accounts foretold Jewish's messianic ministry and baptized him — called also John the Baptist. But later it became a derogative name to call "typical Chinese".⁴ When some famous translators translate Conrad's novels into Chinese, it gets the corresponding negative implication.⁵ From their translation, "John" means foolish, silly or dull Chinese. The following examples can illustrate the negative implication:

...I tell you, they were rolling on the floor together on this very verandah, after chasing each other all over the house, doors slamming, women screaming, seventeen of them, in the dining-room; Chinamen up the trees — **Hey, John!** You climb tree to see the fight, eh? (Conrad, *Victory*, 1921, p.46)

Jukes took care to punctuate these instructions in proper places with the obligatory "Yes, sir," ejaculated without enthusiasm. His brusque "**Come along, John;** make look see" set the Chinaman in motion at his heels. (Conrad, *Typhoon*, 1981, p.158)

⁴ Joan is a derogatory word to refer to Chinese according to Zheng Yili edited *A New English-Chinese Dictionary* (1984) by the Commercial Press.

⁵ Consult in the book of Xue, S. Q. ed., Yuan, J. Y. trans. (1995). *Typhoon* in the collection *Joseph Conrad's Marine Novels*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House.

"Make so — Phooooo!" He expanded his chest and blew out his cheeks. "Savee, John? Breathe — fresh air. Good. Eh? Washee his piecie pants, chow-chow top-side — see, John?" (Conrad, *Typhoon*, 1981, p.159)

...Captain Whalley began again.

"Sofala. Savee So-fa-la, John?" (Conrad, *The End of the Tether*, 1966, p.133)

In the first example, these quoted words are uttered by one of the customers in Schomberg's hotel. He scherzando asks a China boy to climb up a tree to watch the fight. He is unwilling to do this idle behavior by himself so he orders a boy in an impolite tone. The next two examples are from *Typhoon*. Captain MacWhirr asks Jukes to take the Chinese interpreter to the tween-deck where the coolies stay. According to Captain Macwhirr's introduction, this man is Bun Hin's clerk and "a sort of interpreter". So to some extent, he should be different from the other coolie cargo on the steamer and he should be respectable. Actually, it's very funny for Jukes to deliberately simulate Pidgin English to talk with this man who can speak English. In their conversation, this man just speak one sentence "Velly good"; while Jukes seems to show off his language ability by adding the suffix "-ee" to every monosyllabic word ending in a consonant sound. Also from their conversation, we know Jukes is very relaxed and apathetic to this "Chinaman". His tone is scornful and arrogant, fully exposing his racial superiority. The last example is about a "Chinaman" who navigates a sampan on an eastern river receiving Captain Whalley's order. He is asked to go to the place "Sofala", but it seems that he does not follow Captain Whalley's requirement at first. So Captain Whalley repeats the place again and again, and impatiently spells the word "Sofala" At the same time, he is so annoyed by this silly "Chinaman" that he adds "John" to emphasize his unsatisfactory.

Wang in *Victory* is the only Chinese who is generously endowed with a Chinese family name by Conrad. Although he is unlike the other western protagonists in the novel, he still has not got a full name. If one knows a little about Chinese culture, he should have understood Wang is a very common family name in China. Although the writer gives this minor character a family name, it still cannot fulfill readers' psychological satisfaction. It is usually said that name is only a symbol, and has no practical meaning. However, name often contains much in culture. Name is a symbol of identity. Wang in this novel is not a shadow as those in the other four novels. The writer depicts his action, his psychological movement, and his speech. But in Conrad's eyes, Wang is still not distinctive enough to be worthy of being given a full name.

CONCLUSION

In terms of Said's *Orientalism*, "the Orient was almost a Western invention, and had been since antiquity a

place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences." (1977, p.1) Therefore, to some extent, the East is put into western consciousness by imaging it to satisfy its need. The image of China, the same, is shaped by the sense of Orientalism, and from another saying, collective imagination, forms the basis of Conrad's Chinese writing.

Because of the influence of Orientalism and collective imagination, it is not surprising the Chinese image is so negative, somewhat exotic and mysterious. Orientalism is the deep-seated ideology that controls the whole western viewpoint of China, while collective imagination is under such control and gradually forms a certain stereotype about China. Conrad's representation of the Chinese image is against to western cultural context and is certainly influenced by Orientalism.

In summary, though Conrad is quite conscious of the evils and cruelty as what he reveals in *Lord Jim* and *The Heart of Darkness*, he still cannot jump out of his contemporary historical context. His way of naming Chinese and the proportion of China and the Chinese in his description is the reflection of his attitude towards Chinese people. At the same time, Chinese people were disdainfully called "Chinaman, Chink, John" by the powerful countries in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is not strange at all that these Chinese characters do not have real names. Obviously, those Chinese people are written only to play the role of shadow and unimportant background in Conrad's stories.

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