



Reconstructing Others via Translation in the Late Qing and the Early Republic of China

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Abstract

Conceiving translation as a cultural construction tool, this paper, resting on the translation of “foreigners” in China during the late Qing and the early Republic, explores how the West and the Westerners as Others are constructed diachronically in the period. It finds that the prominent scholars in the period, most of whom were educated in the Western academic institutions, produced the discourses on foreigners’ superiority. Foreigner was initially used to describe the phenotypic differences between those born and grown up in China and those who are not. Chinese cultural homogeneity endows foreigners with derogatory connotations. In contrast, the Chinese constitution of discourses on foreigners in the late Qing and the early Republic moves foreigners from a periphery position to a central one in Chinese society.

Keywords: *The West; Others; Reconstructing; Cultural Imperialism*

Introduction

China’s increasing and frequent encounters with the West, to some extent, have revolutionized Chinese society from all aspects in the late Qing and the early Republic of China, as shown in the establishment of modern academic institutions such as Peking University, in the modernity of Chinese literature, and in the importation of Western science and technology (Wang, 2017; Goldman, 1977). The conceptions of the West and the Westerners crept into China in this process of interacting with the West. How are the West and the Westerners as Others perceived by Chinese people? Scholars have always explored this construction and reconstruction of Chinese international images and identities (David, 2001; Pan, 2012; Vukovich, 2013), but few researchers have investigated how the Chinese constructed the image of Others. This paper takes translation as a departure to delve into the changes of foreigners’ identities in Chinese society during this period. After the “cultural turn” since the 1980s, translation is not only linguistic transfer but a complicated process constrained by ideology, poetics, and patronage

(Lefevere, 1992). It can serve for political agenda (Tymoczko, 2007; Cassin, 2018), social and cultural construction (Lefevere, 1992; Bassnett, 2016), and activist purposes (Castro and Ergun, 2018; Said, 2007; Von Flotow, 2016), to name but a few. Therefore, this paper rests on the diachronic translations of the word “foreigners” in China during the late Qing and early Republic, hoping to reveal how Others were constructed by the Chinese in this period and illustrate the cultural forces behind various translation strategies.

The Changes in Foreigners’ Social Status in China

“Englishmen has the beak of an eagle, the eyes of a cat, red beards and hair.” This is how Wang Zhongyang (cf. Dikotter, 2015, p 39), a distinguished scholar in the Qing dynasty, described the physical features of foreigners. The description is the Chinese racialized attitude towards foreigners in the Qing dynasty. Wang was not alone in racializing foreigners at that time. Other scholars, officials, and even ordinary people expressed biased opinions towards foreigners. A Chinese official in the Qing dynasty commented that “even though the people have had social intercourse with the barbarians, they still call them *fanguai* (barbarian devil). They do not even consider them to be human beings.” (Wakeman, 1997, p79). A celebrated scholar in that period compared foreigner to matter, an entity without life (as cited in Dikotter, 2015, p36). During the period, the *foreigner* was translated into *yi* 夷 in Chinese, which means barbarian or uncivilized race. As reflected in these sayings and the translation, the arrogance and cultural superiority of being Chinese were dominant until the later Qing dynasty when the foreign countries vied for the occupation of Chinese territory after Japan successfully and easily secured Chinese Liaodong peninsula during the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Since then, a series of unequal treaties between the Qing government and foreign countries were signed, and more and more Chinese lands were ceded to foreigners. China was then a semi-colonialized country.

Even though some Chinese (for instance Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement) fought against the semi-colonialized status, Chinese superiority gradually gave way to foreigners, especially those from dominated countries who had privileges in China, which was embodied in almost every aspect of social life. In the royal court of the Qing dynasty, the high officials feared or tended to rely on foreigners to address an increasing number of internal problems. *The First Half of My Life*, an autobiography of Chinses last emperor Pu Yi, depicted the life Qing court in the Forbidden City from 1909 to 1924. According to the autobiography, in many critical periods, such as signing the emperor’s resignation letter, accepting Special Treatment Clauses, and deciding where the emperor should reside after being from the Forbidden City (the residence of the Qing court), the officials and sometimes even the emperors, attempted to depend on foreigners to help them out or assumed that the foreigners would do so. Besides, the emperor took the foreign style of living as luxurious and pleasing. With the influence of his tutor Johnston, Pu Yi, for instance, didn’t want to be an emperor. Instead, he wanted to study abroad. He once said in his autobiography that “I told the Household Department to buy me foreign dogs like the ones I saw in the western magazines and even had their food imported from abroad...(Pu, 1964, p144)” The description reveals how inferior the emperor felt and how superior foreigners were. The ordinary people at the time also shared the court’s fears, as indicated in Milne’s description of his first impression of the Chinese when embarking on China.

Indeed, it was painful to observe the undue timidity that men, women and children of all classes evinced at the sight of the foreigners... At fifty yards off, my appearance was the signal for women to bolt into their houses with the screaming children and the bar of the doors... A crowd of gaping mouths and staring eyes would follow at a distance. (Milne, 1859, pp.113-14)

The timidity shown in a Chinese encountering Milne reveals that the Chinese lacked confidence when confronting a foreign culture, demonstrating the superiority of being a foreigner.

Chinese racialization of Others was further strengthened in China's learning from the West since the 1890s, especially after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. These social and political Movements uprooted and denied classical Chinese culture and initiated a thorough revolution by totally adopting modern western knowledge. Consequently, foreigners were endowed with more privileges in China, and the *yangren*, people from the ocean, the Chinese translation of foreigners, gradually gained more positive connotations. Most Chinese vocabulary associated with *yang* at that period, to some degree, equaled the modern or the advanced.

The Chinese translation of the word *foreigners* has changed, and the concepts associated with the word have also altered dramatically. From the initial translation of *yi* (barbarians) to *yangren* (people coming from the oceans), Chinese attitudes towards the foreigners witnessed an enormous change like a roller coaster. Why did Chinese attitudes towards foreigners change dramatically in the late Qing dynasty and early Republic China? This paper argues that foreigners' superiority results from Western domination over scholarly and non-scholarly knowledge production. Drawing on the idea of Quijano's power coloniality and Bourdieu's cultural imperialism, the paper attempts to outline the constitution of the Chinese word *yangren* 洋人 in the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic.

Coloniality of Power and Cultural Imperialism

According to Anibal Quijano (2000), globalization or modernization is the constitution of Europe or America as a new global power, and it implies a kind of hegemony which Quijano termed as coloniality of power. The coloniality of power maintains the unbalanced relationships between dominating and invisibly dominated cultures in three ways: expropriating the cultural discoveries of the colonized peoples to benefit the European center, repressing the colonized forms of knowledge production, and forcing the colonized to learn the dominant culture. These mechanisms facilitate the imposition of western knowledge and naturalize the inequity between the dominating and the dominated; thus, the West justifies its superiority over the non-West countries. In this sense, it is similar to cultural imperialism, which, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), universalizes the particularity of a certain culture to all of the world. However, it ignores the conditions that have spawned particularity. As regards universalizing American conceptions in Brazil, Bourdieu and Wacquant argued that "it [symbolic violence or cultural imperialism] would not be possible without the collaboration, conscious or unconscious, directly or indirectly interested, of all the passeurs, carriers and importers of a designer or counterfeit cultural products (ibid. 46)". Cultural imperialism also strengthens the superiority of the dominating culture.

What coloniality of power and cultural imperialism share is the imposition of European or American knowledge upon other parts of the world while ignoring the conditions shaping the knowledge production, through which the Westerners justify their cultural superiority and neglect the peculiarities of different cultures. In both coloniality of power and cultural imperialism, the West, or the dominating cultures, manipulate knowledge production and circulation in the dominated cultures through various mechanisms, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Their manipulations are also embodied in the content, the channel, and the construction in the colonies. Regarding the content, Quijano (2000) argued that colonizers only choose the stuff that can benefit their profits, whereas Bourdieu emphasized the imperialist power on the colonies via patronage or funding. Both scholars accentuate the constitution of western knowledge in the colonies through either forced education or reproduction by importing intellectuals. Bourdieu also mentioned the manipulation in the channel via the example of the publishing press. This paper relies on three ways of manipulation to analyze the constitution of *yangren* in the late Qing and the early Republic of China.

Diachronic Analysis of translating Others

In the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic, China became a semi-colonialized society when a series of unequal treaties took effect. Unlike what the colonizers did in the colonies throughout the world, the West did not directly impose the knowledge of China. Due to Chinese endeavors in several movements of learning from the West, the production and circulation of Western knowledge in China, however, has achieved a similar effect—strengthening the superiority of foreigners. This paper assumes that various learning movements from the West during this period help the production and circulation of Western knowledge in China, which has complicated the Chinese racialization of Others. At the same time, this paper assumes that some mechanisms the West adopted to colonize the other nations are also practiced. Still, unlike colonies, the Chinese practice of universalizing European and American knowledge in China is conducted voluntarily by Chinese people.

Confucianism has been a dominant ideology throughout Chinese history. Confucianism is embodied in the Five Classics, and the Five Classics are the Shangshu (Book of History), the Shijing (Book of Odes), the Yijing (Book of Changes), the Liji (Book of Rites), and the Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals). All these classics are oriented towards a “homogenous unity named ‘great community’ (大同 *datong*)” (Dikotter, 2015, p2). Homogeneity is the main characteristic of Chinese culture, and Chinese culture uses the same yardstick to measure different components and exclude everything different from it. Chinese culture’s lack of cultural pluralism in China results in cultural superiority over other cultures.

Consequently, foreigners were assigned a lower position in the social hierarchy before and in the late Qing dynasty; for instance, the translation of *foreigner* as *yi* 夷 (barbarian), or *yang guizi* 洋鬼子 (foreign devils) indicated the peripheral position of foreigners in China at that time, which produced numerous narratives concerning the images of foreigners. *Zuo Zhuan*, an ancient Chinese history book, has a saying that *Fei wo zulei, qi xin bi yi* 非我族类，其心必异 (If he is not of our race, he is sure to have a different mind.), which justifies the differences between Chinese and foreigners and expresses Chinese superiority. Another indication of the homogeneity is that China claims that all Chinese are descendants of the same ancestor, the *Yellow Emperor*. Throughout Chinese dynasties, Chinese, consciously or unconsciously, still conceive something essential of being Chinese, despite the existence of more than 50 minority groups in China. According to Wang Hongzhi (1999), Emperor Qian Long agreed to meet the English ambassador only after the translator translated the credentials of the UK in a way that made the King of the UK inferior. When confronted with foreigners, the Chinese always assumed that foreigners could be transformed into their own traits, which is, of course, another indication of the homogeneity of Chinese culture. Before and in the late Qing dynasties, China considered foreigners as primitive animals without any trace of humans, racialized foreigners, and strengthened its own cultural superiority.

With more unequal treaties signed by the Qing government, foreign colonizers came to China to vie for Chinese territory in the hope of establishing their colonies in Chi. However, repeated defeats in fighting against these colonizers and Chinese contacts with Western technology and knowledge shattered Chinese illusions on the foreigners who were no longer barbarians or non-human. At this time, foreigners were translated into *yangren* 洋人 (people from the ocean). In the translation, the derogatory element in *yang guizi* 洋鬼子 (foreign devil) disappeared, and *yangren* became a neutral reference indicating the place of origin.

Realizing the strengths of the foreign countries, China initiated a series of movements to learn from the West. The first one is the Self-Strengthening Movement, or Western Affairs Movement (called *Yang wu yun dong* in Chinese, 1861-1895), which was initiated by the late Qing government with the purpose of adopting western technology and armament. The dominant slogan in this movement is that the

Chinese should learn strength from the West to defeat them. This patriotic slogan implies that the Chinese acknowledged the power of Western technology and armament and started to treat foreigners as humans, perhaps superior to them.

While the Western Affairs Movement focused on the modernization or westernization of technology, the 1898 Reform aimed at the Chinese political and social system. Its ultimate goal was to abolish the traditional Chinese political and social system. The reformers, based on the western existing model, designed a series of reforms that almost touched almost all aspects of social life. Some of the essential reforming visions are recruiting intellectuals via examinations, changing the Chinese political system from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, depending on capitalism to boost the economy, modernizing the Chinese military, and transforming the Chinese education system. Although the new government only existed for a couple of months, its grand visions inspired numerous reform thoughts in the May Fourth Movement and late movements.

May Fourth Movement, also called the New Culture Movement, was the third significant movement during this period. It started in 1919 and claimed that it is an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. Its slogan proclaimed that China should use Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science to replace Mr. Confucius. China considered its traditional culture as outdated and old and advocated for the new culture which is represented by the western cultures, which can be indicated in Liu's argument. "The equation of the modern and a powerful West, therefore, provides the primary condition for the equation of the new and a desirable future in the May Fourth discourse". (Liu, 1995, p82)

The superiority of being Chinese arising from the cultural homogeneity was gradually lost because that culture was outdated and replaced by the western cultures. Consequently, it further improves the position of foreigners in the Chinese social hierarchy.

From Western Affairs Movement to the 1898 Reform and May Fourth Movement, China was gradually abandoning its own culture and adopted the classifications and knowledge of the West. In this process, Chinese cultural superiority slowly disappeared, and the foreigners thus emerged in a high position in Chinese society.

Reconstructing Others

This part explores how China constructed the images of foreigners in various movements of learning from the West, and the analytic perspectives include the content, channel, and constitution of the Western knowledge in China.

1. Channels

After being defeated in the Opium War in the mid-19th century, Chinese intellectuals realized the power of the western army and technology. They thus initiated the Western Affair Movement to learn western technology and armament. Chinese failure in the Sino-Japan war in 1895, however, discouraged Chinese intellectuals from learning western science and technology, and they started to think about the more profound problems existing in China, which spawned the Hundred Day Reform in the late Qing dynasty and the May Fourth Movement in 1919. The ultimate goal of the last two movements was to enlighten Chinese people by closely introducing western knowledge in social sciences and political systems. Two distinctive channels can be identified in these movements, namely translating western knowledge into China and sending Chinese students to study in the West.

In the Western Affairs Movement, the Qing government established two translation institutions to translate western technology, and were Tongwenguan and Translation Division in Jiangnan Arsenal. Since then an increasing number of translation institutions appeared in China in the early 20th century. All the

institutions similarly articulated their translation goals—translating western knowledge to enlighten Chinese people and save China (Fang, 2005, p58). In this process, the power of the West was further strengthened, and these institutions repeatedly sent a message that China was outdated, which, to some degree, shattered Chinese superiority.

Starting in the late 19th century, the Qing government sent Chinese students to study in West countries. In the 1870s, the Qing government sent the first batch of students (about 80 students) to Europe and America (Tian Zhengping, 1996, pp. 53-54). The number of students learning in the West kept increasing since then, and in the year 1906 alone, about 8000 Chinese students were dispatched to study overseas (Zhou Mian, 2008, pp. 130-131). These students later became elites in Chinese society whose opinions exerted significant influence on Chinese culture. Yung Wing, the first Chinese student, to secure an American bachelor's degree in the late 19th century, commented in his published autobiography as follows:

I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful. (Yung, 2007, p25)

Most students studying overseas shared Yung's view of point. When they went back to China, they expressed critical views toward Chinese culture in their books. What these students did, on the one hand, improved the positions of foreign cultures, especially the western cultures, and on the other hand, helped construct the superiority of being foreigners, which I will later discuss in detail.

2. Content

The institutions established during this period had the power to decide what genres should be translated and what content should be translated. In the Western Affairs Movement, the translation institutions, manipulated by the Qing government, put their priorities on technology, and 90% of books translated concerned building armament based on Fang's research (Fang, 2005, p10). In the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals were determined to enlighten the Chinese and save the Chinese nation through learning from the West. Under this circumstance, Western literature and social sciences were introduced through translations, which covered politics, religion, philosophy, law, etc. According to Ma (2006), more than two-thirds of books published in the early 20th century in China have translated texts from the West.

In the process of translating, the western knowledge system was firmly established in China, and one indication is the abolishment of intellectual recruitment examinations and the founding of Peking University, where Western liberal arts and sciences were taught. The Western knowledge was then called new learning as opposed to the old, which was, of course, Chinese learning. Quijano (2015) argued that the coloniality of power also resides in knowledge production and circulation. During this period, the Chinese voluntarily universalized Western knowledge through various learning from the West movements, and this process helped naturalize the superiority of being foreigners.

3. Constitution

Importing the West knowledge system into China indeed strengthened the power of the West. However, Chinese students studying overseas and dominant Chinese scholars in the early 20th century constructed the superiority of being foreigners in their discourses.

As mentioned in the previous part, students like Yung Wing strongly opposed Chinese culture and insisted on a thorough westernization. However, the most important figures in constructing these discourses are scholars like Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi. They praised Western knowledge and

made huge efforts to implement Western knowledge in China. What they did can be divided into two consecutive parts, namely pointing out the backwardness of Chinese culture and reforming it through learning from the West.

Liang Qichao is the most prominent scholar advocating reforms in the late Qing dynasty, and he was the foremost critic of Western imperialism. He constantly supported using translated novels to enlighten Chinese people, which, on the other hand, pointed out the weakness of the Chinese, such as a lack of nationalism, a lack of will for independence and autonomy, and the absence of public spirit (Liang, 1936). Liu argued that Liang “yet still had to subscribe to a discourse that European nations first used to stake their claim to racial superiority. (Liu 1995, 49).” Despite the fact that Liang’s ideas being accepted and praised in China, his efforts indeed strengthened Western superiority.

Lu Xun pioneered the Chinese New Culture Movement and was also considered the father of modern Chinese literature. He went to study medical science in Japan, where he got access to Western knowledge with Japanese as a mediating language. Later, he dropped off and started a writing career as he claimed that medical science could not save China, and only literature could arouse and enlighten Chinese people. He thought that the Chinese language could not express precisely and therefore needed reforming, and the method he proposed was to incorporate Western grammar and expression into Chinese through translation. Language shapes and is shaped by culture, so what Lu Xun argued discouraged more Chinese people and made them feel inferior. As a response to his reading Arthur Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*, he created a novel called *The True Story of Ah Q* to dramatize the Chinese flaws as identified by Smith—avarice, cowardice, and callousness. Although his purpose was to enlighten the Chinese people, he also strengthened Western superiority and domination at the same time. As his story of Ah Q was so famous that almost all Chinese read it in their life, the image of Chinese Lu Xun depicted indeed devalued Chinese people while elevating the foreigners.

Another important figure in this period is Hu Shi, who was the leader of the New Culture Revolution and the president of Peking University. Educated in US academic institutions, he was well equipped with Western knowledge. He fiercely attacked the flaws of Chinese traditional culture, and he actively applied what he learned from the US in various reforms in China, which include pragmatism, individualism, democracy, and human rights movements. He thought that Chinese culture lacked scientific methods and skeptical spirits, and what he did as a remedy was to introduce them into Chinese culture.

Repeated descriptions of Chinese backwardness from these prominent scholars emphasized Chinese “flaws”, which inspired Chinese people, especially the young, to learn from the West. In the process of learning, the young people participate in constructing the West hegemony in knowledge as they all put the West as opposed to Chinese traditional culture.

As a result of the scholars’ discourses, Chinese attitudes toward foreigners changed dramatically. In terms of the Chinese translation of “foreigners”, barbarians were abandoned, and *yangguizi* became *yangren*.

Yangren originally means people from the ocean, indicating one’s place of origin. At the very beginning, it can be divided into several subtypes: southern *yangren* referred to foreigners from southeast Asia, eastern *yangren* Japanese and western *yangren* Europeans, and Americans. Due to the power domination of America and Europe, *yangren* was gradually used to denote only Americans and Europeans, another indication of the West cultural imperialism or coloniality.

At the same time, *Yangren* changed from a neutral reference to a term with positive connotations in Chinese culture. In this process, the root *yang* becomes synonymous to *fashionable* and *stylish*. In the Modern Chinese Dictionary, a total of 18 words denote something modern or advanced among 26 entries

with *yang* as root, and possession of this stuff can show your wealth and power at that time. For instance, *yangfang* (foreign house) is a luxury house of European style; *yanghui* (alien ash) is cement, and *yangyou* (foreign oil) refers to petroleum.

Conclusion

Since the mid-19th century, China, when faced with repeated failures and humiliation from the West, started a path to learn from the West. Through a series of movements (Western Affairs Movement, 1989 Reform, May Fourth Movement, to name but a few), the process of learning about the west was deepened, and its scope was expanded. The process of learning adopts western knowledge system in Chinese society while abolishing Chinese cultural traditions, and it implies a kind of coloniality and cultural imperialism. Unlike what the colonizers did in most colonies, Chinese people voluntarily introduced and incorporated the West knowledge in China in the late Qing dynasty and in the early Republic period. The prominent scholars in the period, most of whom were educated in the Western academic institutions, constructed the discourses on foreigners' superiority. *Foreigner* was initially used to describe the phenotypic differences between those born and grown up in China and those who are not. Chinese cultural homogeneity endows foreigners with derogatory connotations, while the Chinese constitution of discourses on foreigners in the period mentioned in this paper moves foreigners from a periphery position to the center of Chinese society.

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