W. Somerset Maugham and the Politicisation of the Chinese Landscape

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Abstract
In her investigation into the changing literary response to and examination of imperialism during the 1920s and the phenomenon of the rise of the colonial anti-hero, Barbara Bush cites Graham Greene, George Orwell and W. Somerset Maugham as three of the most influential authors of the period who helped perpetuate the West's re-examination of the idea of colonialism (84). Indeed, with such memorable works as "Shooting an Elephant," *The Quiet American* and *The Painted Veil*, together with the abundance of scholarships that address and redress this topic, the importance of these writers to the development of post-colonialism in literature during the early twentieth century cannot be denied. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this ongoing discussion by focusing on W. Somerset Maugham and his use of the Chinese landscape as a means to forward his views on this issue. In particular, I wish to pay attention to the significance of landscape depiction in his narratives and consider its relevance to our understanding of Maugham as an imperialist/anti-imperialist writer within the framework of conventional Saidian Orientalism.

Keywords
W. Somerset Maugham, China, landscape, imperialism, post-colonialism, Orientalism

On the one hand, Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* bestowed upon us an intellectual legacy which enabled us to recognise the Western tradition as a system of cultural bipolarity, on the other hand, it also left us with the uncomfortable predicament of having to deal with the impossibility of anti-imperialism in the West, which the Saidian model essentially denies. It is a dilemma that is best summarised by Daniel Martin Varisco when he observes that:

> A key historical lapse in Orientalism is the starting assumption of a consensual union between Western writers and Western polity. The best

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> that an Orientalist can be said to have is sympathy, which in the end is also subsumed and consumed by the dominant discourse. (136)

Indeed, from Mohammed Sarwar Alam's questioning of Orwell's anti-imperialistic reputation to Abdullatif Al-Khaiat's debate on Joseph Conrad's position regarding the empire and its colonies, the shadow cast by *Orientalism* is such that the premise of the death of the author is seemingly reversed and a severance of the text and the writer's cultural and ethnic background is no longer permitted. Given this, as a writer who is brought up within a Eurocentric and imperialistic environment, anything Maugham says about China or other Oriental countries must inevitably come across as imperialistic and racially prejudiced. Similarly, any sympathy expressed towards the local peoples cannot escape the scrutiny or inklings of hypocrisy. Recent Chinese scholarship in this area reflects such propensity of judgment. Ge Guilu and Wang Liya, for example, are both adamant in their consideration of Maugham's China to be a vehicle for perpetuating the author's ideas concerning an inferior cultural other. Other scholars who make similar claims include Li Congcong, Ma Yu, Sun Lingyun and Pang Ronghua. What all these studies share is the adoption of the conventional Saidian Orientalism theory in their analyses. This is an important indication of the extent to which contemporary Maugham scholarship has become entrenched in the monolithism of Said's discourse.

But is Maugham's stance on imperialism really as abiding as these views seemingly suggest? According to Kathy-Ann Tan:

> While Maugham's short stories are representative of early colonial narratives about the region, and contain, for the most part, stereotypical notions of the local folk (e.g., the Chinese population as a shrewd and cunning race, although lacking in courage, and the native Malay population as indolent people spending all their time drinking or gambling), they seek to problematise the conventional colonial narrative by demystifying the exotic East and unveiling the moral degeneration of the white, male protagonist, whose downfall is partly caused by his attempt to reproduce Western lifestyles on an Eastern island. (168)

Although not worded in such specificities, Tan's observation is acute in its acknowledgement of the existence of three interdependent units of presence in Maugham's writings of the East: the native people, the white protagonist and the (often overlooked) geographical entity of the Eastern land itself. Indeed, in all of the contemporary criticisms cited in the beginning of this article, the interplay between the first two units forms the crux of the investigation. Forgotten is the fact that the depiction of Eastern landscape is, in most cases, just as significant to the authorial reflections on the post-colonial as the literary characters. To illustrate this point, consider the following expostulation by

Grosely from the short story "Mirage,"[2] who experiences shock, confusion and disappointment upon his return to England after a long period of absence:

> It was different from how he remembered it, there was much more traffic and he felt confused and a little at sea. He went to the Criterion and found there was no longer a bar where he had been used to lounge and drink. There was a restaurant in Leicester Square where he had been in the habit of dining when he was in funds, but he could not find it; he supposed it had been torn down. (*Collected* 561)

To a post-colonial critic, the above passage is reminiscently evocative of Kurtz's experience in *Heart of Darkness*, in that the exposure to the East has forever altered the perspective of both Westerners, to the point of rendering them incapable of recognising his homeland and, by extension, their own identity. In the end, Grosely comes to the conclusion that "London was no place for a white man" (564) – a sentiment that is shared by almost all Western protagonists in Maugham's oeuvre, including Walter in *The Painted Veil* and Guy in "The Force of Circumstance" (to whom "England's a foreign land" [*Collected* 276]). This sense of alienation is often recognised as one of the most intriguing aspects of Maugham's critique of imperialism and complicates the attempt to categorise him as an absolute imperialist under the Saidian model. On the contrary, his presentation of the futility of the white man, in that he not only fails to impact the East but loses himself in the wheels of colonialism, suggests an anti-imperialist side on the part of the author. This is not to suggest that Maugham's writing is completely anti-imperalist, nor that his writings present an antithesis to Saidian theory of Orientalism; for it must be observed that his characteristic lack of attention to the native people – a peculiar silence which induced P.R. Billingsley to comment that "Maugham... made even less attempt than did Conrad to depict the Malays" (118) – provides a counterbalance to the afore argument and presents him as a typical coloniser who is oblivious to the local people around him. The fact is simple that, given such polarised attitudes to imperialism as reflected in his writings, it is unsurprising that modern Maugham scholarship appears to be preoccupied with such ambiguity.

It is, thus, interesting to observe that, from Maugham's depictions of the physical landscape, a dimension of reading that has been vastly overlooked by scholars so far, it is possible to uncover a post-colonial subtext which further sheds light on the author's ruminations on colonialism and imperialism as well as on the Saidian theory of Orientalism. Let us turn to the following short character studies from *On a Chinese Screen* titled "The Philosopher," where we find the following passage:

[2] There is also a short character sketch by this title in *On a Chinese Screen*. Though often confused, the two works do not bear any relevance or similarities to each other.

> It was surprising to find so vast a city in a spot that seemed to me so remote. From its battlemented gate towards sunset you could see the snowy mountains of Tibet. It was so populous that you could walk at east only on the walls and it took a rapid walker three hours to complete their circuit. There was no railway within a thousand miles and the river on which it stood was so shallow that only junks of light burden could safely navigate it. Five days in a sampan was needed to reach the Upper Yangtze. For an uneasy moment you asked yourself whether trains and steamships were as necessary to the conduct of life as we who use them everyday consider; for here, a million persons throve, married, begat their kind, and died; a million persons were busily occupied with commerce, art, and thought. (41)

The overall positivity of the Chinese landscape aside, the mention of the railroad in the above scene is of particular importance to (and typical of) the reading of Maugham as anti-imperialistic. The reason is twofold. Firstly, to the English imperialists, the railroad has a long tradition of being regarded as a symbol of civilisation and cultural superiority, an ideology which is reflected in comments such as that by an anonymous contribution of *The Quarterly Review* in 1898, who writes "[i]n Africa, as in all half-savage countries, the railroad is the best instrument for the introduction of civilization" (572). Moreover, as L.C.B. Seaman argues, the imperial nations' superiority is in many ways "based on the developed technology of the railroad and the great, steam-powered iron battleship" (379). It is thus unsurprising that in the post-colonial literary tradition, the railroad has often been used as a symbol of imperialism, such as in Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* in which, to quote John R. Eperjesi, the railroad is used to represent a "techno-modern symbol of death and destruction" (72). Secondly, as a pioneering traveller, Maugham's predilection to use his experience abroad as inspiration for his literary output is well-documented. For example, during the inter-war period, Maugham travelled extensively throughout Asia – experiences which he weaves into such works as *The Gentleman in the Parlor*, *On a Chinese Screen*, *The Painted Veil* and *East of Suez*. Significantly, his visit to China took place in 1920 and 1921, when China had just experienced a period of massive railroad expansion which aroused much political controversies:

> Railway policy of the Peking regime occasioned the revolutionary outbreak. Trouble began when Peking unveiled plans to nationalize the railway lines previously under provincial control. Built by imperialists, financed by imperialists' money, now scheduled for expropriation by an alien dynasty, the railroad emerged as a potent political symbol. (Reed 112)

Therefore, although Maugham does not allude directly to the controversy of China's railway politics, given the extensiveness of the local awareness on this issue and Maugham's interest in seeking out and speaking to prominent Chinese intellectuals of the time, his deliberate questioning of whether such modern inventions were "necessary to the conduct of life" in the above passage does seem to indicate a political undertone in his description of the landscape – one that simultaneously praises the Chinese countryside and its absence of the railroads, which are symbolic of imperialism (and Britishness). It is a point of view that is consistent with Maugham's overall impression of China:

> [T]he country, mysterious and lovely as she was, should aim to preserve its existent cultural tradition and virtues, instead of blindly following the steps of European and American countries in pursuit of scientific achievements and mechanization. (Soong 90)

As such, given what we know of the writer's attitude towards his own culture and tradition as well as his tendency to see China as the antithesis of England, it seems that the politicised undertone of Maugham's depiction of the Chinese landscape is not a coincidence, but a deliberate message that is intended to complement his anti-imperialistic stance. In fact, known primarily as a playwright who excels in non-scenic dialogues, Maugham's ability to articulate his political ideology through the description of the landscape represents a dimension of the writer that is not only underappreciated, but often overlooked. That these descriptive scenes are important to determining Maugham's stance on imperialism and colonialism should not be underestimated. For example, when Kitty Fane first meets Waddington in *The Painted Veil*, in spite of her expectation to learn more about the Chinese town in which he resides, the latter instead "began to speak of London. He talked of the theatres. He knew everything that was being played at the moment and told them what pieces he had seen when he was last home on leave" (78-79). Compare this scene with another scenic description (from *Chinese Screen*) of a traditional Chinese temple which an English lady occupied:

> It was an old temple, a small one, in the city, which she had taken and was turning into a dwelling house. It had been built for a very holy monk by his admirers three hundred years before, and here in great piety, practising innumerable austerities, he had passed his declining days. For long after in memory of his virtue the faithful had come to worship, but in the course of time funds had fallen very low and at last the two or three monks that remained were forced to leave. It was weather-beaten and the green tiles of the roof were overgrown with weeds. The raftered ceiling was still beautiful with its faded gold dragons on a faded red; but she did not like a dark ceiling, so she stretched a canvas across and papered it. Needing air

> and sunlight, she cut two large windows on one side. She very luckily had some blue curtains which were just the right size. Blue was her favourite colour: it brought out the colour of her eyes. Since the columns, great red sturdy columns, oppressed her a little she papered them with a very nice paper which did not look Chinese at all. She was lucky also with the paper with which she covered the walls. It was bought in a native shop, but really it might have come from Sandersons. (2)

We note the followings: just like Waddington's obsession with the theatrical scene in London which makes him oblivious to his Chinese surroundings, the English lady's anglicisation of the Chinese temple by cutting out new windows on its historic walls and redecorating its interiors in an unmistakably English fashion reflects a patent critique of the colonisers' arrogance and inability to appreciate or understand their new surroundings. Thus, not only are such criticisms consistent with Maugham's evident appreciation of China's tradition and heritage, they also reveal his feelings towards colonialism. More importantly, the obviously similar undertones that could be traced between the two passages allow us to establish a sense of intentionality in Maugham's scenic narration – one that encodes the landscape with a critique of imperialism regarding the white men's inability to adapt to and appreciate Eastern cultures. With this in mind, let us return to the interplay between the characters of the white men, the silent natives and the land, and consider its significance through an in-depth reading of the following passage from *The Painted Veil*:

> The vivid scenes with their elegant strangeness, their unexpected distinction, and their strangeness, were like an arras before which, like the mysterious, shadowy shapes, played the phantoms of Kitty's fancy. They seemed wholly unreal. Mei-tan-fu with its crenellated walls was like the painted canvas placed on the stage in an old play to represent a city. The nuns, Waddington, and the Manchu woman who loved him, were fantastic characters in a masque, and the rest, the people sidling along the tortuous streets and those who died, were nameless supers. Of course it had, they all had, a significance of some sort, but what was it? It was as though they performed a ritual dance, elaborate and ancient, and you knew that those complicated measures meaning which it was important for you to know; and yet you could see no clue, no clue. (179)

Presented in this paragraph is an intriguing narrative space in which the white men, the Chinese natives and the landscape are all brought together by Maugham in one consolidated scene – which presents us with an ideal opportunity to observe his reflections on their interrelationship. Firstly, in accordance with the previously mentioned mainstream scholarship on Maugham, we notice the inconsequential mention of the Chinese natives who

are not only silent but unnamed and insignificant. Supportive as this may be of Maugham's inability to transcend the imperialistic aloofness by which he is bound (a consequence of his cultural background and upbringings), the fact that the white men in the above scene (including Waddington's Chinese mistress who is presented in the novel as part of Waddington's circle and the white community) are presented as just as inconsequential lends a degree of ambiguity to the above assessment of Maugham's imperialistic stance. It is almost as if the inconsequentiality of the natives is intentionally placed here to provide a counterbalance to the pointlessness of the presence of the white men. This would suggest a sense of equality between the two which betrays a strong disapproval of the West's imperial activities in the East. Secondly, that this parallel takes place on the Chinese landscape is of fundamental importance – as it allows the focus of the passage to be shifted away from the characters and adds an extra dimension of strength to the author's questioning of the aimlessness and futility of imperialism in general. In the end, by taking into account the ambiguity of this sense of "equality" between the natives and the white men, together with his tendency to present the landscape upon which the characters' interaction (or non-interaction) takes place, we become better aware of the fact that there may be more to Maugham's imperialistic stance than has been conventionally understood according to the classic Saidian discourse on Orientalism. On the one hand, Maugham's inattentiveness to the "subalterns"[3] appears to support Elleke Boehmer's Saidian theorisation of racial differentiation during the nineteenth century:

> When humans were incorporated into this universal framework they were put on the same scale (though much higher) than the animals. In the system of classification involving humans, peoples from other cultures were ranked on the basis of their differences to the European man. As such, peoples from other cultures were ranked lower in the hierarchy than the European resulting in the former being categorized as either the degenerates of the evolving types, the in-betweens, the ones who filled the gap between the human and animal world. (84)

On the other hand, we could not help but wonder if Maugham had attempted to give a voice to the Chinese natives, given his inability to understand the language and his status as a traveller (a limitation which Maugham seems well-aware of), would his efforts have been more successful than that of Pearl Buck, whose literary outputs, when read within the framework of the discourse of Orientalism, remain controversial to this day?[4] Instead, by focusing on the landscape instead of the people and unhesitatingly professing his admirations

[3] To borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's usage of this term.
[4] For more information, see Yoshihara.

for the former, arguably, Maugham has seemingly discovered a way around this dilemma. It may also help explain why Maugham's descriptions of the Eastern landscapes are seldom presented in isolation, but are always intertwined with that of buildings, edifices and even people. His interests in the East, after all, lie in its tradition and heritages (both manmade), and it is through such a style of landscape description that he is able to express his negative sentiments concerning colonialism and imperialism.

In this paper, by paying attention to the existing ambiguity in Maugham's imperialistic outlook and the unique presentation of the landscape in his writings, considerations have been given to the potential of the latter as a key to solving the dilemma of the former. It has also been proposed that, in order to truly determine Maugham's contribution to post-colonialism since the 1920s, it is necessary to move away from the traditional model of Orientalism, a discourse based on racial categorisation (i.e. men [white] vs. men [Chinese]) and instead consider an alternative model based on the opposition between men (the English; the Western) and land (the Chinese; the East). This second model not only helps eliminate the problematic aspect of ambiguity when assessing Maugham's imperialist agenda in extant Maugham studies, but may also prove highly conducive to our understanding and appreciation of Maugham in a post-colonial and imperial setting. Moreover, besides contributing to Maugham scholarship through the reading of his works from a different angle – from the perspective of landscape descriptions – this study, perhaps more importantly, aims to shed light on the potential inadequacies of modern scholarship based on theories of Orientalism and their excessive reliance on the Saidian theorisation – a concept that is based on the distinction between two groups of human beings (the Westerner and the Easterner). This paper thereby urges the future exploration of Maugham's work through the adoption of a more diversifying approach, including but not limited to the presentations of the intricate connections between the characters and the local landscapes.

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