

# Orientalism Within the Creation and Presentation of Doctor Strange

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Doctor Strange has become a representation of superheroes with magic in the world of Marvel. Considering his identity as Sorcerer Supreme, there is a crucial connection between the Orient and his magic. The paper will discuss the detailed symbols of Orientalism in the process of creation and presentation of Doctor Strange respectively to figure out the change of Orientalism with the times within the texts of Doctor Strange and its existence today.

*Keywords:* Orientalism, Doctor Strange, magic in the world of Marvel

## Introduction

Ever since his debut in 1963, Doctor Strange has become a representation of superheroes with magic in the world of Marvel. Noticeably, a number of eastern elements have never ceased to appear in the Doctor Strange series throughout the times. Several characters are from the east, and the mysterious Asian land is also the birthplace of Doctor Strange's magic power. Considering his identity as Sorcerer Supreme, the first and strongest sorcerer in Marvel, there must be a crucial connection between the Orient and his magic, both in the entire Marvel world, and in traditional western culture. Eastern elements under the account of westerners can be well interpreted with reference to the general concept of Orientalism. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the way the idea of Orientalism evolves with the times that is showcased within the texts of Doctor Strange. Based on the main text, 2016 Doctor Strange film, the paper will first introduce the understanding of Orientalism according to Said, then list and discuss the detailed symbols of Orientalism in the process of creation and presentation of Doctor Strange respectively, and eventually, readers can figure out the change of Orientalism with the times within the texts of Doctor Strange and its existence today.

## Symbols of Orientalism in Doctor Strange

The concept of Orientalism mainly involves regions in West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. According to Edward W. Said, the cultural critic and author of the book *Orientalism*, Orientalism is “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny and so on” (1979, p. 2). In the first place a product of European colonialism, as is stated by Said, “a rationalization of colonial rule” (p. 39), Orientalism mainly refers to “the western-predominant impression of the Orient as being exotic, undeveloped and inferior” (p. 300).

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The creation of Doctor Strange and his magic can be divided into three parts, the setting, the looking, and the thinking, among which typical eastern elements envisioned by westerners can be discerned. Though remaining unsure in detail, the geographical setting of Doctor Strange's master, or the place where Doctor Strange's magic originates from, is categorically somewhere in Asia. The Ancient One, an Asian monk, is said to be residing in the vastness of Asia of *Strange Tales*, somewhere in Tibet in India, Land of Mystic Enchantment, and in Nepal in 2016 film *Doctor Strange* (Lee & Ditko, n.d.). The variance of definite residential area may be explained by a bunch of reasons, but one thing is for sure, that especially in the 60s, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, creators of Doctor Strange, neglect the importance of geographical consistency and accuracy. For one thing, due to lack of specific knowledge for the public at that time, westerners collectively perceive Asia as a whole and have established limited concept about separated Asian countries. For another, the setting of Asia itself is enough as a symbolic representation to bring about the allusion intended by the creators for the audience. With characteristic cultural and geographical features like loess land, smoke, carts, and temples, the exotic atmosphere and undeveloped city construction identified by westerners have been successfully created already. Imposing the impression of being exotic and undeveloped by taking advantage of the Asian setting is a common tool in superhero productions. In "The Case of the Ruby Idol", the villain Sin Fang hides himself in Chinatown, and in the movie "Batman Begins", Bruce Wayne travels to the far east to undergo poverty and suffer pain shared by ordinary people there. It is not hard to figure out that the setting of the Orient gives the western audience an immediate impression of being exotic and undeveloped.

Considering the looking of characters in Doctor Strange, the Ancient One "captures an early sixties' stereotypical vision of a mysterious but wise man from the East", according to Gruber, a scholar studying the relationship between Doctor Strange and Tibetan Buddhism (2015, p. 353). He holds that

...the Ancient One's bald head, his sparse but lengthy facial hair, the robes he wore, ... the exotic throne he sat upon, and the mysterious pot of smoke wafting through the air around him, provided the audience with the visuals they expected to signify the Orientalism of a sage named the Ancient One. (p. 353)

What is interesting is that, not only is the Ancient One depicted with traditional Asian facial features in the comic series "Strange Tales", but also Doctor Strange, the American neurosurgeon, has a contradictorily curious Asian look, as can be seen from his long eyes and rising, thick, black eyebrow. This phenomenon can be explained by the popularity of horror comics in the 50s and 60s. Horror comics, focusing on horror fiction, reached its peak in mid-1950s and following this trend, Marvel Comics produced a comic series titled "Strange Tales" from 1951 to 1968. One of the characteristics of these horror comics is that on most story covers, though superheroes depicted actually fight for justice and stand for the bright side, they tend to be drawn with horrifying looks so as to make their stances ambiguous. Take "Dr. Strange Master of Black Magic" in #110 "Strange Tales" as an example. The weird facial features of Dr. Strange, the dark blue dress, the mysterious black dots and giant amulet, and the general purple background color, all strive to mystify the character, let alone his "inappropriate" title, "Master of Black Magic", which contradicts to Doctor Strange's real identity as a magician serving justice. Christopher Goto-Jones explains in his essay "Magic, Modernity, and Orientalism: Conjuring Representations of Asia" that "orientalism became an authentic theatrical device, helping to locate the magician in a realm of magical possibilities in an industrial age of radical de-enchantment" (2014, p. 1473). The horrifying sense created by orientalism also arouses mystery; together they create an "arena" for the "appearance" of magic, thus explaining the drawing style of "Doctor Strange" comics.

The thinking of Doctor Strange does not fall into a single religion, but can trace back to eastern religions like Buddhism, Hinduism etc. For example, the transformation of Doctor Strange from having fears and hopes to abandoning his secular obsessions “provides insight into the implied...religiosity of generations of Buddhist studies scholars” (Gruber, 2015, p. 349). In another case, when Sorcerer Supreme got seduced by “beautiful women and worldly pleasures he once adored as a successful surgeon” (Gruber, 2015, p. 367), he conquered it by saying “The world is an illusion! Lust is an Illusion! The illusion is transcended!” (DeMatties & Green, 1986, pp. 39-40). Here, Doctor Strange fought against these temptations the way Sakyamuni Buddha, the enlightened teacher and widely-adored role model in Buddhism did, following the dharma of the religion. The classical scene of astral projection (Fig. 3) performed by the Ancient One in the 2016 film Doctor Strange is regarded as a capability developed in fourth Jhana, a very high level of mental status in Buddhism. Strictly speaking, these thoughts of Doctor Strange cannot be categorized entirely into symbols of Orientalism, the western misunderstanding of eastern culture, since partially, they follow the actual practices and doctrines of the original religion. However, it is undeniable that they have undergone some Americanization by creators, with their own interpretation of Oriental religious thoughts. As has been mentioned above, most thoughts of Doctor Strange are excerpts and artificial combination of different eastern religions. Meanwhile, some of the concepts originating from eastern religions have been interpreted in a western way. For instance, “Strange’s recognition of his ‘true self’ is more doctrinally consistent with popular psychology than Buddhist theories of Buddha Nature” (Gruber, 2015, p. 367). Therefore, from the thinking of Doctor Strange, scattered evidence of Orientalism can also be found.

### **Change of Orientalism With the Times in Doctor Strange**

The presentation of Doctor Strange mainly demonstrates characteristics of modern Orientalism, referring mostly to the inferiority of Asian demographics in western ideas. This is showcased and further expanded by Hollywood Whitewashing phenomenon in the 2016 Doctor Strange film. In the film, director Scott Derrickson replaced the Tibetan monk in the original comics with a white nun casted by the Scottish actress Tilda Swinton. Meanwhile, based on the original Marvel Comics, Doctor Strange is trained to be the Sorcerer Supreme after undergoing a pilgrimage to Tibet and learning magic and doctrines from the Tibetan master the Ancient One. However, in the 2016 film, Doctor Strange’s destination became Kathmandu, Nepal, deviating from the original work and audience anticipation.

There are many explanations accounting for the “adaptation” of Doctor Strange 2016 film. One of the screen writers of the move, C. Robert Cargill, brings out one reason. She describes that the archetype of the Ancient One in the comic book is “a racist stereotype who comes from a region of the world that is in [a] very weird political place” (McMillan, 2016). By acknowledging the Ancient One originating from Tibet means admitting the independence of Tibet from People’s Republic of China, and thus Marvel and Disney will risk losing billions of Chinese audience simply by irritating the Chinese government by turning this film politically sensitive. In addition, it would have been illegal for Stephen Strange to travel to Tibet alone and stay there for a long time, for all non-Chinese passport holders have to apply for a Tibet Entry Permit and travel in groups. However,

Marvel denied changing the character to please Beijing and vaguely adduced their “record of diversity” as well as comic-book continuity: “The Ancient One is a title that is not exclusively held by any one character, but rather a moniker passed down through time, and in this particular film the embodiment is Celtic”. (Claverie, 2017, p. 166)

Another reason for not choosing an Asian actor/ actress, for instance, a Nepalese, is that individuals from Nepal come from so many different casts, ethnic groups and minorities that any single selection might touch the political red line. In addition, though it is undeniably a leukocentrically Whitewashing action, Marvel Studios spends every effort hiding it. In their description of the casting of Doctor Strange 2016 film, Tilda Swinton is Celtic, a pre-modern and ambiguous way of identity describing, obviously trying to hide the familiar concepts of countries or races behind the word “Celtic”. Celtic is also far less familiar to most audience, therefore not many will instinctively realize that the actress is simply Scottish and white, or Hollywood is playing the trick of Whitewashing again. According to Claverie, “Doctor Strange represents Marvel’s attempt to steer the interests of Disney shareholders between those of longtime fans, Beijing censors, and Asian Americans eager for an end of Hollywood whitewashing and yellow face” (2017, p. 166). However, Hollywood finds its efforts in vain, probably due to the great success of the film in terms of the box office. Together with other Whitewashing evidences in several Hollywood films, a number of Asian American celebrities, “such as John Cho, Margaret Cho, Keith Chow, Ellen Oh, George Takei, Ming-na Wen and Constance Wu” “created their own Twitter campaign in #WhiteWashedOut to raise the more damaging critique of the whitewashing of Asian roles across time and the more frequent omission of Asians within Hollywood’s leukocentric narratives” (Park & Joon, 2018, p. 136). People are using this method to protest against “modern Orientalism”, the ambiguous and unspoken racial discrimination from the white to Asians today.

From the debut of Doctor Strange in “Strange Tales” in 1963 to the production of 2016 Doctor Strange film, there is an evident change of Orientalism, the western understanding of the east, that is showcased in these Marvel productions. Doctor Strange was first named “Master of Black Magic”, and then changed to “Master of Mystic Arts” in 1974. There is no official explanation for this change, but to some extent, the horrifying impression of the Orient abates by removing the phrase “black magic”, which “traditionally refers to the use of supernatural powers or magic for evil and selfish purposes” (Melton, 2001). In the 1963 comics, Wong, the servant to Doctor Strange, is an unnoticeable supporting role dressing in traditional red suit of men in Qing Dynasty and skillful of martial arts. In comparison, the 2016 film elevates the position of Wong, making him a highly protective librarian of Kamar-Taj and a helpful learning assistant of Stephen Strange. In addition to martial arts, Wong is adroit in practicing magic and he has abundant magic knowledge like knowing about the Infinity Stones. In some sense, Wong is also a mentor of Doctor Strange. He warns Strange when he tries to practice the time spell in one forbidden book by saying that “your curiosity could have gotten you killed. You weren’t manipulating the space-time continuum, you were breaking it. We do not tamper with natural law, we defend it” (*Doctor Strange*, 2016). From this, we can see how Marvel is trying to attach greater importance to Asian characters. And plus, if the explanation given by the screen writer C. Robert Cargill is true, more realistic and objective acknowledgment of Asian issues has been developed, rather than the unreliable and imaginative impression of exotic, undeveloped, and inferior Asia that is prevalent in the 50s and 60s.

### Conclusions

Hardly anyone today deems Asian civilization as exotic and mysterious, and “it is no longer the case that the general public would assume that an Indian or a Chinese man would be somehow more essentially magical than someone from London or New York” (Goto-Jones, 2014, p. 1475). Although certain biased ideas within Orientalism remain insoluble, just as Christopher Goto-Jones puts it, in the modern world, the connection between the Orient and mysticism turns into “a kind of nostalgia”, one form of Orientalism that is passed down

from decades ago (p. 1475). The orient becomes a stage for western mysticism, but generally, the western world is constructing a fairer understanding of the Orient, and the Marvel cinematic productions provide good examples for studying this changing idea of Orientalism. Marvel Studios, as a giant of American film production, acts as a representation of western popular culture. From the study of Orientalism in Marvel productions, we can tell that these typical American superhero comics and films demonstrate to world audience something more than the story of America along. Rather, the entertainment industry, symbolizing popular culture, also reflects American public view and understanding about the outside world, including Asia, and the eastern world as a whole.

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