

The Death of the Empire of Gentlemen in Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen*

LUO Huxin

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The ideology is rooted in the reality of reproduction which refers to the most basic guarantee for the existence of the whole society, which can be directly reflected by the economic situation. The image of empire or the gentlemanship is planted in the most powerful period of the British Empire. However, in the 20th century, Britain's strength has declined rapidly, and the entire reproduction system has undergone drastic changes. The ideology in it will naturally have a violent shock, which is manifested in the collapse of the image of empire or the spirit of gentleman. However, ideology itself should have a body of ideological state apparatuses. Therefore, to discuss the change of ideology itself, the specific ISA needs to be focused, that is, why Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen* should be selected.

Keywords: Maugham, *On a Chinese Screen*, Althusser, imperial ideology

Introduction

It is normal that the fall and decline of a nation occur in the world and through the ages tremendous countries and nations governed by the historical periodic law have prospered and unexpectedly perished. The law is not the issue of the paper which will shed the light on the part of the fall and decline that is the destiny of everything. The reality will finally be demolished. The reality is itself since before the current one there is a previous link of it which will sublate or destroy itself because it is no longer reasonable. By refreshing itself, it will become reasonable again and become the reality of the next link. Britain confronted such a radical moment in the late of the 19th century and the early of the 20th century. In this drastic transition, unprecedented changes were devouring the whole of British society in which various contents exhibit themselves; however, there is only one aspect of ideology discussed in the paper which is about the collapse of the image of British Empire or more specifically the gentlemanship.

The Plight of the Empire

What is the image of the Empire? Or what is the image born of? What is its role? In the most direct sense, it is a symbol of the self-identity. However, how can the self-know that it needs to know itself through this symbol, or how can it determine what the self is? That is, it acts like a mirror which reflects the self that is capable of knowing itself in the reflection and also is opposed to the self. Nevertheless, the "mirror" though it is isolated from the self still dwells in the self since the self knows itself through the symbol in other words through absorbing the symbol which but always keeps the independent position into itself. Hence, the self knows itself

in the projection of itself onto the alienated symbolical mirror or “in conscious opposition to the Other beyond their shores” (Colley, 1992, p. 316).

Britain recognizes itself through a self-projection onto other nations, which is a difference that causes to self-identity. The reason why Britain has an imperial identity is that it is in the position of absolute power compared with other countries. The British bourgeoisie took the lead in not only seizing political power but also completing the industrial revolution. The speed and scale of its entire capital accumulation can only be followed by other countries. In the process of exchanges with other countries and regions, which can be represented by trade and colonization, its imperial image has gradually taken shape.

However, it is insufficient that the essence of the image of empire is understood. The superficial surveys are reached, which Britain achieves the self-identity through the self-projection. Britain realizes itself through this image which is derived from the concrete and realistic state-to-state or state-to-region relationships, so the image is a kind of consciousness abstracted from reality, more specifically, an ideology which “is an imaginary assemblage constituted by the reality” (Althusser, 2014, p. 175). The image is rooted in the reality of interrelationships between various countries and regions which is constructed on the reproduction and the image will modify or destroy itself as the continuous changes of reproduction of the international community.

What is reproduction? The world is produced, which means the most basic material maintenance of it. Therefore, production must be in a state of continuous reproduction which can be roughly expressed by economic status. What kind of acute changes have taken place in the British economic situation at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century? Although the economic situation is complex considering that we are investigating the changes of the image of the empire, the economy takes foreign trade as a main reference. The proliferation of capital or the valorization of value is necessary in the circulation field which includes domestic and foreign circulation. Only is foreign circulation mentioned for the limitation of paper in here. Before World War I, Britain's foreign trade policy was *laissez-faire* under which the government did not interfere with the market in which commodities and services were completely free to flow. As a result, Britain's capital could be rapidly increased and its strength of industrial production could be swiftly improved, which reversely nourished the free trade. However, with the development of capitalism, the long-term and free proliferation of capital, due to the private ownership, will inevitably lead to the monopoly. The rise of other capitalist countries, coupled with the fact that Britain's own development has also entered a period of intensification of contradictions, has impacted Britain's status. Since the reality has entered a state of monopoly, and the backward countries want to rise rapidly, they must adopt a centralized trade policy that is the protectionism. Both the United States and Germany have adopted protectionism. However, in the face of the threat of the rise of these two countries and the deterioration of Britain's own development, Britain also had a dispute over the transformation of trade policies which is the struggle between free trade and protectionism. It is an inevitable tendency of the capitalism to replace free trade with protectionism. However, Britain was obstinate on this issue and adhered to the free trade, which is a sign of recession because it ignored the necessity of the development of its capitalism itself. The crisis of Britain is not the trick of magician but a necessity; hence though the crisis in Britain was officially triggered after World War I, it has been shown before World War I. “The Boer War is its exposure of imperial weakness” (Timlinson, 2012, p. 213). After the World War I, Britain declined in an all-round way. Even though the protectionism finally replaced the free trade policy at this time, the situation was completely different. In the face of the cruel reality of recession in which the ideology rooted, the once powerful image of British Empire had naturally collapsed and become something that people scoffed at. However, the image is still an unspecified and

broad notion, and its determinations are very rich. Which one of them can represent the whole image and show the collapse of it?

Maugham and His Gentlemanship

The image of the British Empire is suitable for its strong national strength and economic status, so it must show an image of self-confidence, generosity, and elegance which are signs of power to outsiders. Combined with Britain's own historical tradition, the gentlemanship is the best vessel of this image. Actually, "British society's obsession with the gentlemanship reached the peak in the nineteenth century" (Chen, 2016, p. 110) in which Britain flourished and became the hegemon of the world, but with the decay of Britain in the 20th century the image of empire fell. Although gentlemen appear in modern times, their roots are derived from chivalry in the middle ages. Therefore, gentlemen have always been the characteristic image of the British ruling class. "With the economic rise of the bourgeoisie, they are also eager to enter the gentleman class and improve the social status" (Chen, 2016, p. 110), which is able to be seen that after the bourgeoisie becomes the ruling class, the gentlemanship is transformed into their representative image.

A new concept, class emerges. As mentioned before, the image of empire includes the gentlemanship which is a type of ideology planted in the reality of reproduction containing a certain mode of production which is constituted by "the unity productive forces/relations of production" (Althusser, 2014, p. 20). The relations of production exist between people who dwell in certain strata which are in the struggle. The ruling one must exploit the ruled one, or it will perish. In order to maintain its existence, the ruling class must uphold a smooth operation of reproduction through keeping the most important factor in reproduction, people. The problem of man equals to the problem of exploitation between classes that is the problem of relations of production, and ideology is to ensure "the uninterrupted reproduction of the relations of production in the 'consciousness' of each subject (each agent of production, of exploitation, and so on)" (Althusser, 2014, p. 200).

The image of gentleman plays the functions not only on the domestic field but the international community. In the domestic, the gentlemanship is superior to the ruled class which is eager for the elegance of gentleman all their lives. It is an ideal appeal for the ruled classes to attempt to complete the class migration requiring them to work laboriously and ceaselessly, which just plays a role in preserving the reproduction of relations of production. As far as the ruling class is concerned, gentlemanship is a symbol of the distinction from other classes and the manifestation of solidification of class. Internationally, the image of gentleman represents the power of Britain and becomes a symbol of being superior to all other countries and colonies which either endeavor that they can get closer to the image or prove that they can surpass it. No matter what, they must strive to engage in the system of international reproduction led by Britain and they may provide raw materials or a sales market for Britain; in this process, gentlemanship plays an ideological role for ruling the relations of production between countries.

Although ideology guarantees the whole system, how does the role play? "Centred on subjection, ideology makes individuals who are always-already subjects (that is, you and me) 'go'" (Althusser, 2014, p. 199). In other words, ideology as a relatively independent substance can automatically enter people's consciousness and dominate their behavior. However, for the motion in itself and the exhibit of itself ideology must possess a "material existence" which is "apparatuses" and "the practices of the apparatuses" (Althusser, 2014, p. 184), and this is the ideological state apparatuses abbreviated as ISAs. Ideology can "interpellate" (Althusser, 2014, p. 188) the individual to become the subject embedded into it through the ISAs.

This is how the gentlemanship plays its role in ensuring the reproduction of relations of production. As a cultural ideology, the gentlemanship has its own ISAs, and *On a Chinese Screen* is one part of it. This travelogue is no longer a simple literature work, but bears the responsibility of the ISAs. The readers and even the author himself who is also called by other ISAs of the same type are interpellated and embedded in gentlemanship. Nevertheless, *On a Chinese Screen* is not quite simple. With the changes of reality, the gentlemanship must be altered. Only in its material carrier or ISAs can this change and decline be seriously explained. Moreover, the interpellated subjects will also be splitted due to the changes in reality and the gentlemanship which might be opposed or supported. Maugham as a member of the ruling class is also the subject of the gentleman spirit so he strictly obeys the norms of gentleman, and still defends it as the decline of it, which is similar to Confucius. However, Maugham also belongs to the stratum of intellectuals who “think of themselves as ‘independent’, autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc.” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 8). In other words, as an intellectual, Maugham agrees with the genuine gentlemanship hidden in the general one which belongs to the bourgeoisie and is hypocritical. From the standpoint of intellectuals, he will never defend the gentlemanship mindlessly and irrationally. On the contrary, he will vividly show the irreconcilable contradiction between his desire for the return of the true gentlemanship and the collapsing it and such a contradiction will also expose the decline of the entire ideology of the gentlemanship.

On a Chinese Screen, as a part of ISAs, is like a canvas, on which the sunset of the times is painted. Both the author and readers will be attracted by this scene and become the subjects of it, but they may sigh or rejoice. At last, this sunset scene will be properly appreciated.

The Self-Suffocation of British Empire

On a Chinese Screen consists of several sketches which are simultaneously jotted down by Maugham while the thoughts about his travel occur to him, so compared with other fictional works this half-journal one is endowed with the more characteristics of reality which constructs and conveys the tension between the reality of decaying gentlemanship and Maugham's conservative pursuit of it. As ISA, *On a Chinese Screen* undertakes the responsibility of body of gentlemanship which is inferior to the reality as a type of ideology and possesses the essence of governing class which is represented by the author, Maugham. Nevertheless, *On a Chinese Screen* is not a pure defense of ruling class though it is the ISA because of the inevitable changes in the reality of decline and the unique and even paradoxical position of Maugham who as an intellectual is different from the bourgeoisie but reliant on it. Maugham is eager for the true gentlemanship that it is wonderful qualities of Britain but he also knows that the real gentlemen are rare under the hypocrisy of bourgeoisie. At the same time, he attempts to be a neutral observer who depicts the scene that he sees and the unavoidable fall of Britain and shows his humanitarianism to those disadvantaged people such as coolies who are “the beast of burden” (Maugham, 2000, p. 56).

When Maugham chatted with a pilot who “knew the port first hand on fifty years ago” (Maugham, 2000, p. 33), he told Maugham that “those were the days of the tea clippers, when there would be thirty or forty ships in the harbor, waiting for their cargo”, “but now the trade was gone” (Maugham, 2000, p. 34). Maugham came to China after the WWI and Britain's reality of reproduction and the trade policy have been shaken but the situation cannot be improved any more, which is the basic tune and background of *On a Chinese Screen*. Britain put herself into “the process of decolonization” which causes “the erosion of these values” of gentleman (Thompson & Kowalsky, 2012, p. 280). In the degenerating arena, the decaying gentlemanship unfolds itself in the contradiction between Maugham's beautiful illusion and cruel reality.

In *On a Chinese Screen* Maugham describes various images of characters to highlight his chase of real gentlemanship and the exposure of the fact of degeneration.

"England was no place for a gentleman nowadays" (Maugham, 2000, p. 68), a doctor said to Maugham. Doctor's words hit the mind of Maugham who thinks the doctor is a real gentleman who possesses "polite behaviour" (Maugham, 2000, p. 68), "voice and gesture", "manner", and "antique courtesy" (Maugham, 2000, p. 69) which are the characteristics of a real gentleman which Maugham sincerely adores. Nevertheless, compared with the lament of doctor, these qualities conversely cause an effect of irony which splits the beautiful dream of gentleman and the reality, which exhibits the inevitability of fall of gentlemanship.

In Maugham's impressions, the Vicomte de Steenvoorde should be a man with a "sense of honour" (Maugham, 2000, p. 52) which obviously is a feature of gentleman. "M. de Steenvoorde talked like a magazine" "of sound learning and influential opinion" (Maugham, 2000, p. 53). Maugham's respect and yearning for this vicomte demonstrate his insistence on the gentlemanship through all of these properties which are necessary for being a gentleman in Maugham's standards. However, Maugham also presumes that he is "a poor man, but ambitious" (Maugham, 2000, p. 53) since as a man with noble spirit he marries a vulgar woman who is a daughter of merchant most fiercely disdained by Maugham. There is another doctor named Macalister. Compared with the mentioned doctor, Maugham is interested in his experience of degeneration from "a charming idealism" (Maugham, 2000, p. 58), which directly presents the covered intention of Maugham that he gives his attention not only to maintain the gentlemanship but to the breakdown of it and such a contradiction vividly shows the unstoppable ebb of gentlemanship. Dr. Macalister finally becomes the person who he hates because of the loss of spirit of struggling and the choice of becoming a merchant.

As mentioned before, the image of gentleman is the symbol of ruling class but is a hypocritical one which is obviously rejected by Maugham out of his relatively independent identity, an intellectual in the ruling class. Maugham always wants a genuine and pure gentlemanship which is an expression of his naivety from the romantic perspective of intellectuals since the absolutely ideological image cannot exist without the soil of reality and the gentlemanship is destined to be hypocritical. The gentlemanship is falling because its master, the Britain's bourgeoisie is losing the controlling power and when it keeps the social status domestically and internationally, the game of hypocritical gentleman can continue, but with the drainage of its influence the image of gentleman naturally cannot hold itself. The real one is dying so the derived one, the abstract and perfect one also cannot survive. It is half correct that Maugham blames the death of gentlemanship for those secular and philistine bourgeoisie, but Maugham does not understand that the death is necessary because the spirit is bound to those fading ruling class. The struggle between Maugham's endeavors to save and restore the pure spirit of gentleman and the decaying reality of it in *On a Chinese Screen* explains the failure of Maugham's actions and the necessary degeneration of image of gentleman with the changes of the basic reality.

Conclusion

Maugham documents various images of characters that are full of contradictions between the preserving gentlemanship and the unavoidable decaying of it in *On a Chinese Screen* which is one part of the ISAs that is the materialization of ideology. If the ideology though it is tied with the reality needs to be properly described and even analyzed, it will be placed into the specific context of the ISAs; in other words, the degeneration of gentlemanship or the image of empire cannot be explained only in the description of the changes of reality of reproduction. Therefore, the analysis of *On a Chinese Screen* or other ISAs is the terminal in which the changes

of Britain's ideology can be demonstrated with clarity. Through the contradiction in *On a Chinese Screen* the decline of the gentleman is finally illustrated with the most vivid picture whose root is in the reality.

References

- Althusser, L. (2014). *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. (G. M. Goshgarian, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Colley, L. (1992). Britishness and otherness: An argument. *The Journal of British Studies*, 31(4), 309-329.
- Chen, B. (2016). Responsibilities and boundaries: The English gentleman and the British Empire in the oriental tales of William Somerset Maugham. *Foreign Language*, 37(4), 109-117.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Translated by Hoare Q. and Smith G. N. New York: International Publishers.
- Maugham, W. S. (2000). *On a Chinese screen*. London: Vintage Books.
- Thompson, A., & Kowalsky, M. (2012). Social life and cultural representation: Empire in the public imagination. In A. Thompson (Ed.), *Britain's experience of empire in the twentieth century* (pp. 251-297). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tomlinson, J. (2012). The empire/Commonwealth in British economic thinking and policy. In A. Thompson (Ed.), *Britain's experience of empire in the twentieth century* (pp. 211-250). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whiting, R. (2012). The empire and British politics. In A. Thompson (Ed.), *Britain's experience of empire in the twentieth century* (pp. 161-210). Oxford: Oxford University Press.