

The Constructed Image: “China” in Gertrude Stein’s Composite Matrix of Aesthetics and Politics

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As a representative modernist writer of the early 20th century, Gertrude Stein creatively established a unique experimental writing style to support her modernist expression. This paper attempts to analyze the Oriental elements, especially elements and images related to “China” in her works. Stein’s uses these elements to construct a systematic and complex matrix of aesthetics and politics. “China” in Stein’s matrix is an essential source of her so-called “the oriental peaceful penetration” and a significant lens for her ideological expression and political thoughts. Although Stein emphasizes her Oriental components in the source of identity, she always places herself in a Western position, ignoring cultural and political expressions in the real Chinese context and turning “China” into a useful tool in the collective fantasies of the West.

Keywords: Gertrude Stein, China, the orient, aesthetics and politics, modernism

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) is an icon in the American literary world, who first proposed the general term “The Lost Generation”. She developed a unique writing style in the current of modernism: bold, innovative, and obscure.

During the two World Wars, China, as one of the most representative countries of the Orient, attracted the considerable attention of the Western writers, especially the modernists in the early 20th century. Stein took this opportunity to explore images of China, both aesthetically and politically, and tried to incorporate them into her work. This paper aims to argue that China provided Stein with aesthetic inspiration and the support of experimental writing in the 1930s, when modernism was prevalent. At the same time, with the surge of the national power of the United States, Stein conveniently uses the “Chinese” culture, ideology and politics in fantasy, which clearly shows the political views that promote American liberalism. Under this process, she forms a composite matrix of aesthetics and politics.

Literature Review

In the previous studies of Stein’s literary works, only a few analyses have paid attention to her application of Oriental imagery.

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In "The Orients of Gertrude Stein", Josephine Nock-Hee Park (2009) pointed out that Stein included Eastern countries in the imaginary space of her mixed-identity defense on the grounds of the so-called "oriental peaceful penetration"; However, due to the limitation of her sympathy for the Far Orient, Stein had a split mind about whether the Oriental image could be tamed or not. In the view of Shawn H. Alfrey (1997), Stein used the "the oriental peaceful penetration" as a force to expose the spatial and temporal rupture that exists between early 20th century Europe and traditional Europe in a global macro context (Alfrey, 1997, p. 415). This revelation also helped her break through the walls of traditional literary frameworks.

These two articles mainly analyze the aesthetic influence and philosophical thinking brought by the peaceful infiltration of the Orient to Stein and her works, but didn't put much emphasis on the political views. Tze-Yin Teo (2019) in his study "Gertrude Stein's Atomic Bombs: Her Pacific War" mainly illustrated Stein's reflection on the use of atomic weapons in World War II under experimental writing techniques, and grasped the key word "interest" in Stein's works to track on the dynamic relationship between aesthetics and politics, so as to further analyze Stein's reflection on war. In addition, Birgit Van Puymbroeck (2017) has made a detailed analysis of Stein's undated article "Let Us Save China," disclosing how Stein combined politics and aesthetics, and how Stein's political thought is related to or even built on her attitude towards China.

The previous studies have interpreted the Chinese or Oriental images in Stein's works from different angles and scopes. But they fail to connect Stein's ideas and ideology with her writings touching upon Chinese and Oriental images; they haven't dug out the composite matrix of aesthetics and politics behind Stein's thought, which had a certain deviation and dislocation in the communication of the real image of China. Therefore, based on these essays, this paper tries to clarify Stein's use of the image of "China" in her works and her real purpose of placing it under the aesthetic and political composite matrix.

The Catalytic Effect of Chinese Elements in Aesthetics

Like many other modernists like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Thornton Wilder, Stein was concerned about the changes China was bringing to the world, and wanted to comprehend the Orient, where she had never been to.

During the exploration of the Orient, the great modernist artists from all over the world who gathered in Paris were grouped together in "the Orient" by Stein. Based on this categorization of the Orient, Stein throws out a new concept, "the oriental peaceful penetration" in *Everybody's Autobiography*: The Orient was no longer the place with safe distance that Europeans imagine it to be, while it asserted some of its global subjectivity amid the vagaries of world events. Entwined in this assumption, she believes that the Orient is a place full of knowledge away from unnatural processing. The natural culture which is formed by thousands of years history, neither stable or small, could give her fresh and aesthetic inspiration.

In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein notes that "Chinamen they count with pebbles" (Stein, 1985, p. 102). Also in "Poetry and Grammar", one of her lecture series, she likewise states that "the natural way to count is not that one and one make two but to go on counting by one and one as Chinamen do" (Stein, 1957, p. 227). In Stein's worldview, "Chinamen" do not add up the parts to get the whole, but presuppose the whole from beginning to end. The Chinese way of counting is more flexible and abstract, unconditionally assuming that all elements are equal. This counting pattern became increasingly woven into Stein's writing and had a profound impact on her style.

Beginning with *Three Lives*, the elements of her work operated like the multisensory accumulation, until the accumulation itself could give it its own value and explanation depended on each reader. Richard Kostelanetz believes that this style of writing, inspired by Chinese counting patterns, makes the sentence itself a kind of "aesthetic object" (Kostelanetz, 1980, p. XV). This usage of metalinguistic awareness to change the grammatical formation of words in sentences also provides cultural support for her anti-traditional writing experiment. For example, her famous line from the poem "Sacred Emily": "A rose is rose is rose is rose is rose", it is cyclical and cumulative, not a gradual climax, not led by one part (Stein, 1957, p. 5). Stein found a way to get rid of the constraints of time and subjective factors and focus on expressing the purest feelings in mind. In *The Making of Americans*, she repeatedly argues that each person's history emerges through repetition because each person has an "intertextuality" with others (Hu, 2022, p. 57). In the process of their own growth, traces of repetition appear, so that everyone could catch a glimpse of the life of the previous generation and the next generation.

In tracing of a person's history, Stein not only prompts through repetition, but also directly expresses her search for identity in her works. As the world devolved, the persecution of Jews during the war and the accelerated flow of Eastern populations to Europe reinforced Stein's anxiety about the "fluidity and fixity of identity". (qtd. in Park, 2009, p. 38). Her Jewish-American identity made her need to find an outlet in her work to make sense of this mixed identity and thus provide herself with a safe refuge. She finds herself in a situation similar to those of Chinese immigrants: fixing mind on the accuracy of appearance, in the framework that defines their relationship to things outside, but the inner part is still fluid. She also makes several references to the influence of China or "Chinese"¹ on her writing, as well as the sources of inspiration she draws from it. The "Chinese" servants who have been with her for a long time are proof of this. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, she learns from them that these Chinese who had come to Europe, while fixing mind on the surface by the Western concept of naming, still have internal resistance. This break with Western tradition led Stein to think differently:

I used to think the name of anybody was very important and the name made you and I have often said so. Perhaps I still think so but still there are so many names and anybody nowadays can call anybody any name they like. We have Chinese servants now and sometimes the name they say they are had nothing to do with what they are they may have borrowed or gambled away their reference and they seem to be there or not there as well with any name... (Stein, 1985, p. 2)

From this quotation, combined with her role as the hidden narrator in the play *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Stein has her own thoughts and actions on the symbols of self-identity. Learning from her "Chinese" servants, she begins to rethink her statement "the name made you" (Stein, 1985, p. 2). She tries to avoid symbols and metaphors of an embedded self, instead of using identity as a metalinguistic form, which is placed in repeated phrases and changing pronouns. This seemingly objective and hidden writing makes Stein start to learn from "Chinese" to step back and rethink her own identity from a relatively objective position, and try to grasp the intersection of fluidity and fixity—that is, to position her identity in writings, but at the same time let it not be bound by external objects. In the script of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, most of the lines are completed by four saints. But at some key

¹ Stein believes that the only "Chinese" she comes into contact with are her Chinese servants, but in Tze-Yin Teo's "Gertrude Stein's Atomic Bombs: Her Pacific War", he confuses Stein's servants with the Chinese by suggesting that they were Vietnamese. Stein, in his book *The Autobiography of Every Man*, refers to his servants Trac and Nguyen as "Indo-Chinese". In addition, France's colonial rule of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia brought a large number of local labor force to Paris. This makes it more likely that the servant was a Southeast Asian.

points, Stein asks questions as a chorus, in order to remind the audience of the existence of the author, without placing the narrator's words on the surface of the lines.

Even though her servant is not really Chinese, she still rationalizes him in her works and inspiration. More importantly, when she describes her Asian servant, she takes a utilitarian attitude to face the loss of the real identity of Asian servant, and fails to describe and condemn the reasons of the loss. At the same time, it also reflects that Stein does not show sympathy and reflection on the painful experiences that people of China and Southeast Asian countries in the bottom of overseas society in the early 20th century, which further proves Stein's acquiescence to the behavior of Western hegemony.

But in cultural value, Stein sees the power of the Orient and reinvents it. In her insight into the intersection of fixity and fluidity, Stein sees the spirit of modernism that best fits her identity. From there, she created her own aesthetic map from a redefinition of "the Orient": defined by modernist agents, it encompassed far more than the traditional concept of a state or nation, and beyond Edward Said's Orientalism:

When a thing is completely different then it is not romantic then it comes nearer to being an adventure, the Orient to the Occident has to be that, but to an American particularly a Pacific Coast American the Orient was not a romance not necessarily an adventure, it was something different altogether. (Stein, 1970, p. 66)

Stein's "Orient" is a world independent of "romance" represented by Paris and "adventure" represented by the United States. The concept of the Orient is a mixed subject in Stein's universe, emphasizing its hybridism. Stein's Jewish-American identity imbues her with irreconcilability and counterintuitive insight. This change alarmed Europeans took it for granted that they were at the center of the world.

Stein tried to grasp the aesthetic value of the "penetration" through her mixed identities, and persuade Europeans to accept rather than vehemently opposing it. In her aesthetic initiative, she skillfully runs through Chinese Taoist thoughts such as "the integration of Yin and Yang" and "the homogeneous theory of things", indicating that the penetration should be treated with "peaceful defense". In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein uses the example of "Pacific defenses": Faced with the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, Parisian workers would meet a greater flow of water with larger rubber hose (Stein, 1985, p. 2). Though it is ludicrous to build a flood control project against the Pacific in Paris, which does not border the Pacific, Stein uses such paradoxical events to express the interdependence, inclusiveness and openness of Orient and West, while providing ballast for her own identity anxieties. Thus, it can be seen that Stein does insist on the significance of cultural inclusiveness, but the main purpose of Stein's assertion of "peaceful penetration" is to justify his own identity.

Combining the above points with her life experience, we argue that Stein's "China" and the inspiration she draws from it are not supported by actual experience. Based on these Oriental conceptions, she builds an aesthetic framework, defend her own identity, and emphasized her modernism concept. However, in the process of serving her own aesthetics and inspiration, Stein still takes the West as the center of the world in essence, and is indifferent to the "other" context of the Orient.

Evolution of the Image of "China" in Political Thoughts

While Stein builds an aesthetic framework with China as an important source, she also combines Chinese images in her works to express her political thoughts. In her reflections on Sino-US relations, she often mentions

the "mother" image of China, the interest connection between China and the US under this relationship, and the necessity for the US to save China during the World War II.

Stein likes to define concepts metaphorically. During World War II, Stein discussed Europe's plight in the war. She sees political leaders and authoritarian figures as "father" and finds a special kinship in the tense international situation:

There is too much fathering going on now.... There is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Trotzky and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now.... Fathers are depressing and China was more a land of mothers than it was a land of fathers. (Stein, 1985, p. 112)

Integrating Chinese counting model into this definition, Stein assumes that mother counts in an abstract way and all children are treated equally, but father does accumulation in patriarchy. In relation to kinship in Stein's political thought, the image of "father" represents individualism and capital accumulation advocated by most western countries, while the image of "mother" is a kind of collectivist spirit and tolerance handed down from ancient times in China. Stein also clarifies the position of challenging the logic of expansion on the premise of wholeness, but also allows for autonomy among the parts, unlike a cumulative system (Puymbroeck, 2017, p. 201). It can be inferred that Stein's antipathy to the role of "father" also implies the evil of colonial countries' plunder of China for the purpose of capital accumulation. Stein's appreciation of the image of "mother" is not only a voice for China's anti-colonial rule and anti-fascist war, as well as a recognition of the superiority of collectivist spiritual characteristics, but also implies that America can be transformed into a mother figure. In other words, Stein blends "counting like Chinamen", the role of "mother" and collectivism in the context of Chinese traditional culture, from which she obtains the more reasonable political concept. But in fact, it is a disguised replacement between the traditional governance characteristics of "China" and the political concept of the United States. It is indeed a defense of American liberalism.

In reality, Stein had never been to China, and her understanding of Chinese politics is based on what she heard and read. She equates the complex political situation and simple governance of China in the 1930s with collectivism. Stein argues that Chinese collectivism includes "everyone", combines the individual and the community, even transcending political and religious differences. The collectivism spirit is the result of thousands of years of Chinese culture condensation: from First Emperor of Qin unifying the country to the establishment of the Republic of China, there is the influence of collectivist spirit. However, the political system and government rule adopted by China in modern times were not simple collectivist spirit. Especially in the 1930s, the suppression of the Communist Party of China and the common people by Chiang Kai-shek government made this collectivist spirit vanish. Therefore, it can be inferred that in some respects, Stein's praise of "mother" in politics is not the praise of the real China, but the image of "China" as a reference to remind the Western countries that they can no longer play the role of "father" in the political development. This recognition of China's concept of governance and anti-aggression is also reflected in her "political manifesto", "Let Us Save China".

From the undated piece, Teo summaries six reasons from Stein why the U.S. should "save" China:

- (a) China is interesting so it would be interesting to save China;
- (b) both China and the U.S. are "big countries" who "should stand by each other";

- (c) bootstrapping is difficult without prior advantages—"priming the pump"—and China cannot be expected to achieve that;
- (d) saving China would require "courage" and "everyone" wants to be courageous;
- (e) the Chinese are "convertible religiously speaking [sic]," thus carrying a special appeal and interest to members of all political and religious groups across the spectrum, such as Communists, capitalists, artists, liberals, radicals, and religious people;
- (f) last but not least (more muted towards the end of the piece, and positioned in a different paragraph from the above reasons), [w]hat a pleasure to save China, to begin, to go over there in the way a big country can go. (Teo, 2017, p. 4)

These reasons are considered by Teo as a kind of faux- naïf reasoning (Teo, 2017, p. 4), because in reality, such political reasons and positions are completely untenable. In essence, Stein adopted a backward approach: first recognizes China's contribution to the anti-imperialist system and its political model, and then emphasizes the responsibility and role of the United States in maintaining the world affairs system from a different angle, hoping that the United States could save China "in the way a big country can go". At the beginning of her article, Stein quotes from the US Declaration of Independence, but she doesn't specify which country the "republic" is at the beginning—Stein tries to find similarities between the republic and China in her argument to achieve a utopian transformation between the United States² and China. Her main purpose is to support the political development of United States, as well as the prominent contribution in Pacific theater.

In order to make the statement more logical, Stein also brings in the economic relationship between China and the United States. Stein argues that China has a unique interest to the United States. She establishes a logical underpinning of economic self-interest, in which "China" refers here to a particular economic system that determines the relationship between China and the United States—"the loss of a single China leads to the loss of an idealistic America as a whole" (Ashton, 1997, p. 201). This is also an excuse for Stein to justify America's current Open Door policy. But in real history, China is not a country that needs to be "saved" by the United States, as Stein calls it; nor has the United States "saved China" as a "big country", as Stein imagines.

From the political perspective, Stein's political framework takes China as a crucial source and simplifies China's political situation to serve her own political position and American politics. "China" in her political expression, under the premise of her inadequate understanding of China and the intention to serve the American spirit, has become a useful tool for Stein to show "political correctness", publicize American great power style.

Siege and Breakthrough Under Compound Matrix

From Stein's perspective, the Orient is to the West the same as the experimental writing of modernist aesthetics is to traditional writing. In this context, Stein's experimental structure, which draws inspiration from China, symbolizes the transcendence of traditional power relations, traditional world patterns and traditional writing styles. In order to realize the resistance to tradition and the transformation to modernism, it is necessary for her aesthetics and politics to be integrated in the same matrix. This composite matrix is built under a certain logical structure, but there are still contradictions under the siege of logic. This contradiction becomes the breakthrough of matrix.

² In the papers of Bright van Puymbroek and Tze-Yin Teo both propose that the republic Stein refers to is in fact the United States.

In the composite matrix of aesthetics and politics, the outstanding composite feature is the integration of Orient and West. From her perspective, the Orient is a system of change, while Europe is a system of expansion (Puymbroeck, 2017, p. 203). She combined the two systems in her matrix. The concepts and endogenous forces of the Orient opened cracks in the hegemony of the European tradition, subverting traditional aesthetics and ideas, in line with the modernist writer's mission. In Puymbroeck's analysis, he points out that Stein's anxiety and unease about identity juxtaposed and her combination of various frames and discourses to produce a complex matrix (Puymbroeck, 2017, p. 199). Under this matrix, the oriental elements provide Stein with a good excuse and support, allowing her identity to move between the Orient and the West, forming the organic combination of her identity flow and China, and also providing reasons for her writing and sufficient motivation for her to construct a new matrix.

The matrix is like a melting pot, made up of various frames and discourses, but it needs ties to logically connect political and aesthetic elements to become systematic. The link between the two ends is the key word "interest". Stein repeatedly mentions this word in her works about China, which serves as a pun and fits in with her matrix. Based on the analysis mentioned above, it can be seen that under the relationship of economic interests, Stein advocates politics based on economic exchanges, replacing hard power with soft power, since China is a country that can provide rich interests for the United States. In fact, the interests Stein advocates are not formed on the basis of mutual benefit, but similar to the Open Door policy, are American profits centered. But it's this weak link that gives the matrix a break.

On the other hand, though it is clear that "the oriental penetration" has shortened the distance between the Orient and Europe, China is still a country too far away to imagine. Stein recorded that a philosopher threw her a question:

Years ago when I knew Hutchins Hapgood, he was a philosopher then... And so one day he gave me a test question. Would I if I could by pushing a button would I kill five thousand Chinamen if I could save my brother from anything. Well I was very fond of my brother and I could completely imagine his suffering and I replied that five thousand Chinamen were something I could not imagine and so it was not interesting. (Stein, 1985, p. 72)

This is a philosophical question about compassion. For Adam Smith, compassion arises by "changing places in fancy with the sufferer" (Smith, 2006, p. 4). She can change places with her brother in her imagination, but not with Chinamen in mortal danger. At the same time, this philosophical dilemma is the direct source of the ethical question in *Four Saints in Three Acts*—"If it were possible to kill five thousand Chinamen by pressing a button would it be done" (Stein, 1990, p. 586). These Chinamen are unimaginable and foreseeable to both Stein and Saint Theresa. So they both have the same answer: they are "not interested (interesting)". But it should be made clear that the "interest" here is more inclined to the excuse that Stein finds based on philosophical dilemmas. For Stein, it is hard to imagine China's predicament because it is beyond a sympathetic natural distance. In contrast, Saint Theresa is asked a shortened version of this philosophical question, and Stein did not set the permutation condition for pressing the button. Thus, a moral question is transformed into a simple act of vandalism with unanswerable absurdity. This devastating statement shows the disillusioned, nihilistic Dada aesthetic that Stein adopted because of her ejection of conventional artistic standards. From a historical point of view, 5,000 Chinamen are only a small fraction of the total number of people who died in the fight against aggression in modern China. Fact does not need to rely on imagination, so Stein's excuse of spatial distance is not reasonable.

Fundamentally speaking, Stein's "unimaginable" and "disinterest" are actually to avoid talking about the fact of Western invasion of China, to downplay historical facts in the way of philosophical dilemma, and to shift readers' attention to her modernist thoughts. Therefore, in essence, "China" here is also a hypothetical object put forward by Stein, a lens of her aesthetic expression, separated from the real China.

Stein's message is that moral compassion is constrained by distance, but not by the fact that others have been, or will be, hurt. "China" is remote and inconceivable, and therefore uninteresting; But when it comes to politics and economy, "China" becomes conceivable again, full of interests. These two attitudes are inherently contradictory and irreconcilable. Thus, it can be seen that this kind of contradiction makes image of China in Stein's works unreliable, but the contradiction and dialectical unity in a pun promotes the construction and development of this aesthetic and political matrix.

Stein also has an explanation for the authenticity of "China". Modernism, she insists, does not follow the principle of authenticity, and the value of objects comes from uncertainty. Because authenticity is an obsession, "one like to be deceived, but not for too long" (Stein, 1957, p. 67). In her opinion, "China" is a piece of art, and the art within the frame must find a balance outside. So Stein chooses "China" and shapes it in her experimental way. It can be seen from this that the "China" in Stein's matrix is lack in authenticity, which is why it has strong fluidity and is full of contradictions in her works. But no matter from the political or aesthetic perspective, the root of Stein's "deception" comes from the Western-centered cognitive system. As "other", China is marginalized and loses its own discourse, which is constantly reshaped and exploited by Stein who constructs the image of China without a solid basis on facts.

In short, Stein uses the particularity of her own identity to integrate and exchange the Orient and the West, in which the relevant discourses and elements about China and the Orient are linked together through the bond, "interest", forming a systematic matrix. It seems that a logical and self-consistent siege is formed in the matrix integrating Chinese images, but "interest" also creates a breakthrough to prove the unreliability of her account. The contradictions it produces and the modernist uncertainty she insists on prove that "China" under Stein's composite matrix is not real China, but a symbol in Stein's fantasy. The purpose is to serve her modernist aesthetic and practical political needs.

Conclusion

Gertrude Stein placed herself in the Orient, took the "China" as the lens of her aesthetic expression, and coined the so-called "oriental peaceful penetration", providing a rich source of inspiration for the balance of fluidity and fixity in her identity. In addition, due to her inadequate understanding of China's reality and her own political attitudes, the image of "China" has changed and become a vital tool for her political expression. In her matrix of aesthetics and politics, "interest" is the key link. She has personally bounced back and forth between "interest" and "disinterest", making this matrix full of contradictions and inauthenticity. However, it successfully enables Stein to realize the subversion of tradition in her modernist thought. "China" becomes a sharp blade for her to pierce the Western tradition.

Although Stein emphasizes her Oriental identity and distinguishes the Orient in her definition from Said's Orientalism, it can be seen from her casual shaping of "China" that she still gazes at China from the perspective of

the Occident and does not understand or respect the Chinese context. China has always appeared as "other" in her description of China, without discourse on its own.

The starting point for all Stein's actions is still essentially the promotion of individualism and American liberalism. Her praise of China's cultural aesthetics, politics and humanitarian concern is in fact a promotion and support of her modernist discourse, mixed identity and American dominance. After all, "China" is a mirror image of Stein's writing. Her view of China is not based on reality, but mostly based on her own imagination of a distant country. The mirror ultimately reflects a phantom, and the real China is still covered up in the Western context.

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