

Beyond “Exoticism”: Strategies for Constructing the Images of China in Western Movies¹

CHEN Yu

Shanghai Film Academy, Shanghai University

Imagination of China in Western movies presented by “exoticism” is no longer the dualism of “backward and traditional Oriental” but “advanced and modern Western”. *Skyfall* released recently has shown on the one hand a “modern” contemporary China, on the other hand, a cultural concept of “isolated relics of traditional China and ruins of modern China”. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, China is imagined to be a mixed land of the new and old, the Oriental and Western based on the comparison between China and India, which is considered to be primitive, traditional and brutal. *Mission: Impossible III* presents three sides of Shanghai in a mean way: “skyscraper”, “old-style apartment” and “ancient town”. Here we could see, the images of China in Western movies are comprehensive and complicated, conveying divergent cultural views. Moreover, increasing Chinese market constitutes a crucial reason why Western movies intend to hide their political bias but adopt a flattery attitude to Chinese culture.

Keywords: Exoticism, Western movies, imagination of China

Western movies tend to tell a story about China, in which their perception of the “exotic country” in the Orient weighs more than the story itself. We could know the understandings of China in Western culture by studying their imagination in these movies. To analyze this “exoticism”, we used to take the path of “Orientalism” by Edward W. Said and “the national allegory of the third world country” by Fredric Jameson and other postcolonial theories. According to Edward W. Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention” and “the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate”², thus we must clearly distinct the following concepts while discussing China in Western movies: First, we should recognize real China and imagined China. In Western movies, scenes shot in China as background or the shooting place are not simply an imitation or recurrence but an issue about what and how to present China by the approach of Western culture and value. In this way, our study on China in Western movies aims to analyze Western conception or perception of China rather than Chinese elements themselves. Second, both the “Western” and the “Oriental” are vague concepts. In a narrow sense, the “Western” refers to developed capitalist countries in Europe and America; in a broad sense, the concept of the Western refers to the whole

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CHEN Yu, born in Luyi, Henan in 1975, is an Associate Professor in Shanghai Film Academy, Shanghai University, and a senior visiting scholar of Duke University. Her research field covers Movie Arts and Cultural Industries. Email: cyuzjun@163.com

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, translated by Wang Yugen, Joint Publishing, 1999, pp. 1-2.

world of Europe, America, Australia and even Japan. Similarly, the “Oriental” is not confined to China but countries and regions in northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Mid-Asia, Western-Asia and Arab States. For example, the “Oriental” in Edward W. Said’ *Orientalism* refers to his Palestinian background. Third, there is difference between China as a symbol and that as a nation. In a movie, the scene is not always shot where it should be: sometimes a place is not in accordance with the exact location or even screened in a studio due to various reasons. We could never deny the symbolic meaning of a so-called place due to its non-existence.

Besides, we could analyze images of China in Western movies beyond cultural politics. For example, we all know that China is always “demonized” in American press, television and film by their presentation of China’s feudalism, backwardness, ignorance and brutality, and by their criticism of China’s despotism, corruption and lack of freedom. The United States has regarded China the largest socialist country as their potential “enemy”, but interestingly, Western movies are not designed to make an enemy of China. In 1984, *Red Dawn* was released depicting “the Soviet and Cuban invasion of the United States. In 2008, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer rescreened this movie but substitute the protagonist with a Chinese man, causing wide controversy. Therefore, when the film was released to the public in 2013, the producer changed Chinese character into Korean. Against the background of Cold War before and Post-Cold War today, China has been regarded as the potential enemy by the United States. But why the United States altered the attitude towards China during the process of moviemaking and public release? We could not clearly interpret the transition only by the approach of cultural politics. Through analyzing the images of China in three typical Western movies, from *Skyfall* released recently to the two representative movies in the 1980s and the beginning of the 21st century, the author exemplifies the transition of “China” as “exoticism” in Western movies beyond the theory of cultural politics.

The Inversion and Dissension within Images of China

The Western’s interest in “exoticism” first emerged in colonial times since the 18th and 19th century. Along with Western developed capitalist countries’ occupation and enslavement by military, political and economic means in Africa, Asia and America and meanwhile, “exoticism” is gradually constructed in literary arts and values. The primitive, brutal and unenlightened colonial images promoted Western confidence of their core values of democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity, forming dualism such as “modern the Western” and “traditional the Oriental”, “advanced the Western” and “backward the Oriental” and other stereotypes. However, during the two world wars and the rise of independent movements in the third world nations in the 20th century, the world had witnessed tremendous vicissitudes in politics and economy. Developed Western countries had no choice but to confront with the rise of emerging countries and adjust their views and attitudes. The images of China in Western movies therefore became more characterized and complicated in this period.

Skyfall which was released at the end of 2012 is not the best of the James Bond series but with the most images of China. In this movie, MI6 agent James Bond was inadvertently shot by Eve Moneypenny when he fought against Patrice fight atop a train. James Bond was thought dead until MI6’s servers were hacked and MI6 headquarters exploded, leaving corpses and chaos. James Bond stood out again to investigate and track down Patrice in Shanghai. The scene unrolls the fantastic night view of Pudong, Shanghai by aerial photography, Lujiazui skyscrapers radiating and Huangpu River serenely meandering. After receiving the message, James Bond hurried to Pudong Airport to confirm and trace the terrorist. Along the route of Pudong Airport, Xu Pu Bridge and Yan’an Elevated Road, they finally stopped at a skyscraper with a glass curtain wall

as its main façade, reflecting dreamy Shanghai: We could feel the hustle inside the airport but tranquility outside; Xu Pu Bridge from overlook seemed like a colorful garland on the ribbon of Huangpu River; even the chasing scene under Yan'an Elevated Road turned out a riot of colors shrouded in mysterious blue light³. James Bond followed the terrorist up the elevator, where the confined transparent cube rendered the building as grotesque as Baroque architecture. The terrorist took a small piece off the glass curtain, located his machine gun and aimed at the object, ambassador to Yemen who was appreciating the painting in the building opposite. During the process, the neon sign across changed the patterns weaved by light, showing Chinese characters or jellyfish. The colorful rays and transparent glass curtain attracted the audience out of the material world into an "alien world" or a "future world" which we could only feel in a scientific movie. Apparently, this is the "real" night view of Shanghai tinged with cinematic imagination of China: no longer that traditional China of poverty, feudalism and observance of Confucius and Mencius, nor the modern China represented by the Puxi Bund a mixed land of the old and new, the Oriental and Western, but a utopian China in the 21st century represented by modern Shanghai which would amaze the world beyond imagination.

Another unprecedented scene in *Skyfall* is the façade view of MI6 headquarters building, which had never clearly described in James Bond series before (since *The World Is Not Enough* in 1999) but was presented as a real building in the two scenes of *Skyfall*. The first scene is at the beginning of the movie, the panorama of MI6 across the Tames River: The myriad lights twinkled at night, among which stood out the orange-lit building in sharp relief, darkness all around. The atmosphere is not cold as white, or mysterious as blue, but tranquil and warm as the orange-tinted color. As the camera turned into the room, M sank into the dim light with agony and nostalgia, rain kept pattering. The other scene is also at the beginning: The loss of the hard drive containing agent information rendered the whole Britain intelligence apartment in crisis and M at the verge of resignation. On M's way back to her office, she discovered that MI6 servers were being hacked and what was worse, from her own personal computer. However, the traffic jam blocked them to save the MI6 building from explosion. In this scene, we could feel a sense of stately reality while seeing its roof hidden among thousands of granite London buildings. After the explosion, headquarter of MI6 was moved to underground, a part of the Bunker built at that time by Winston Churchill as it was said. The solid rock basement would remind us of the "sewer" which was an image repeatedly described in British literature since the 18th century⁴. It is warmth, stateliness, the abundant sense of history and ration and other cultural information that the MI6 building and other British architecture were designed to convey. By comparing these two scenes, we could discover that the image of Shanghai carries the meaning of modernism, post-industry, utopia, illusion and dream, while the image of London, tradition, industry, past-sense, reality and stateliness. Apparently, *Skyfall* presents the inversion between the Oriental and the Western, completely rewrites the stereotypes of "modern the Western" and "traditional the Oriental", "advanced the Western" and "backward the Oriental", "future the Western" and "past the Oriental" and other orders of discourse analyzed by postcolonial theories before.

There are also images of traditional China. James Bond came to Macau after finding a gambling chip from the leavings of the Iran terrorist. The window of the house he lived followed the typical garden style of Ming

³ The director of the second video group Alexander Witt once said in an interview, "Because it is one of the main roads with unusual blue lights." ("*Skyfall* is Coming to China Next January", *Xinmin Evening News*, 2012. 11. 21).

⁴ "The sewer" is a classical image in the 19th century European literature. Here it refers to a place dark and wet, dirty and vice, as well as a hidden place for tramps and criminals. Meanwhile, it constitutes the critic and the opponent of the hypocritical human world, and thus Hugo titled the sewer the "urban conscience". (According to Zeng Jun, "Metro Space: a Reshaping of Aesthetic Depth", *City and China*, No.44).

and Qing Dynasty and there were Chinese elements in the casino they went: palaces, lanterns, dragon boats, fireworks... but just for the decoration of casino layout. James Bond was discovered and had to fight with the casino security sergeant in a semi-enclosed basement where a giant lizard was kept. Despite Chinese elements of candlelight and lions, the whole scene is actually an imitation of the ancient Roman arena. In light of this scene in Macau, the images constitute a symbol of China without any daily-life meaning.

We could see a similar scenario in the following scene: James Bond and Séverine the mysterious lady were captured and by the former MI6 agent Raoul Silva who orchestrated the attack on MI6 for his revenge, and were escorted to an uninhabited island on which buildings of residence and a deserted factory were located. The central square was a collapsed giant statue and scattered daily necessities including a signboard written Chinese characters “Chun Long...”, bicycles, tricycles, carts, rattan chairs, lockers, speakers and so forth, indicating industrial characteristics in the preliminary period of New China. What matters is not where the place is, but the presentation of a deserted island and a grotesque landscape of China in past tense.

If juxtapose the three scenes about China, we could clearly see the Western concept of the Oriental nation behind their imagination in *Skyfall*: There left only isolated relics of traditional China and ruins of modern China which is characterized by socialist revolution and construction, but emerges the contemporary China which amazes and confused the Western world with all her cultural particularity of as reform and opening up, market economy and consumption society and other rapid changes extracted, leaving a mixed sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity.

A More Modern Oriental Country Mixed with the Western

As *Skyfall* inverts “modern China” and “traditional Britain” (The word “modern” refers to “the level of modernization” and “traditional” refers to inexplicable traditional culture. Both of the words are not related to a specific historical period) to arouse distinction between the Oriental and the Western among the audience over the globe, one of the strategies of constructing images of China in Western movies should be the presentation of China in an “Oriental” context and distinction between China and the Western. In 1983, American film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* directed by Steven Spielberg and featured by Harrison Ford was started shooting, in which the story took place in China. The directors had imagined a scene of Indiana Jones flying in his motor on the Great Wall but the idea was refused by Chinese government. Unwilling to abandon the original idea, they turned to shoot a Shanghai scene in Macau due to the restrictions of times. Anyway, these vivid elements have crowned the film a classical Hollywood one of imaginary China in the 1980s.

The story of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* started from a scene in Shanghai, 1935. In the 1930s, Shanghai fell into a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, which then was characterized by a mixed land of the old and new, native and foreign, where resided inhabitants from all regions. In this era, “A paradise for adventurers” could be the best title for Shanghai, which could be the best shooting place for *Indiana Jones* as an action-adventure film. The story unrolls from a nightclub in Shanghai: A bruiser struck the gong engraved with the logo of Paramount and the pattern of two dragons playing with a pearl. Then the camera turned to the stage where the performance combined Shanghai music in the thirties with Hollywood dance started to play. Apparently, this scene is not a recurrence of real Shanghai in the 1930s but an imaginary vision of Broadway style. The archaeologist Indiana Jones was poisoned by a crime boss when he traded a diamond for Nurhaci’s cremains. After his narrow escape with singer Willie and the antidote from the fight with the crime gang, Indiana Jones ran away in the car driven by his 11-year-old Chinese sidekick Short Round. The car bumped its

way in the street chase, frightening pedestrians and breaking lanterns on the street. We could see the daily-life images of Shanghai citizens in the 1930s such as vintage store façades, neon lights, colorful signboards, strolling pedestrians, rickshaw pullers and street vendors. Especially, compared with non-daily-life Shanghai and Macau in *Skyfall*, the imaginary restoration of daily scenes in Shanghai of the 1930s in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* partly made up for the loss of shooting in another place.

Besides the thirteen minutes concerning Shanghai at the beginning of the film, the female singer Willie and the Chinese kid Short Round carried on their stories started from Shanghai with Indiana Jones all through his adventure. Willie, from Miami, came to Shanghai for years according to herself, "I have a villa with garden, acquaintance of the rich, a spacious convertible to parties. I am very happy in Shanghai." It is obvious that Willie became one of the immigrants in Shanghai as the representative of Western element. For example, she plays as a sociable role that acquainted with the crime boss. Short Round, a Chinese boy, closely coordinated with Indiana Jones like father and son. He became an orphan since four years old when his parents were killed in the Japanese bombing attack in Shanghai. One day he was caught stealing Indiana Jones' money and later became Jones' sidekick. Short Round usually speaks English but only speaks Chinese in a hurry (For example, when he and Dr. Jones played poker, finding each other cheating, he argued in Cantonese: "you have four cards and I do not have four cards!"⁵) Another Chinese sidekick of Indiana Jones, Wu Han was shot at the beginning while trading with the crime boss. Before his death, he said that he had followed Jones on many adventures. We could see that Indiana Jones has a close relation with Chinese and he could even speak a little Chinese. Willie as a singer is a typical urban citizen who plays according to circumstances, selfish, greedy, and "frightened facing danger, beaming with smile in temporary safety". Short Round is smart and tricky, who can drive and possess many qualities beyond his age: vigorous and agile, facing risk without panic, calm and adventurous. Characters like Willie, Short Round and Wu Han carried Chinese images in Hollywood movies, presenting Shanghai in the 1930s as a combination of Oriental and Western culture.

Besides, while presenting Shanghai, what imagination of China was composed in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*? There are two Oriental countries in the story: One is China (Shanghai) and the other is India (a village and a "palace"). Here let us discuss the imagination of two Oriental countries in one Western movie. On the flight to Deli, the pilots who collaborated with the crime boss parachuted out before the plane crashed. The trio narrowly managed to escape by jumping out of the plane on an inflatable raft, and then riding down the slopes into a raging river. They come to a primitive village in northern India, where villagers still keep their tribe customs. The tribe chief led them into the village where they were believed to have been sent by Shiva to retrieve the sacred sivalinga stone stolen from their shrine, from evil forces in the nearby Pankot Palace. Pankot is surrounded by tropical rain forest and wildlife; but beneath the façade of magnificent and extravagant palace, we can see their brutality: The trio is provided food like poisonous snakes, living insects, and chilled monkey brain as desserts (of course fabricated). The question is that, why to make strong comparison between the rich and poor, the luxury and vulgar, civilized and brutal? Not only a joke. The trio explored the underground tunnels seeing young workers in their production line contributing hard work; they eventually reached the underground temple where the Thugs worship Kali with human sacrifice. The whole scene is eerie, barbaric and bloody. The imagination of India in this movie is also based on such a primitive and mysterious orientalist imagination.

⁵ Most of the Chinese dialogues are in Cantonese, not in accordance with Wu dialect used in Shanghai. This mismatch may stem from the shooting of Shanghai in Macau, or that Cantonese is used widely among foreign Chinese world.

Therefore, there are two divergent imaginations of China and India in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*: “more modern”, open, and pluralistic China but primitive, closed and benighted India. Of course the standard of “modern” is based on the developed Western capitalist world. Indiana Jones, an epitome of the Western, has shown more affinity for “modern” China but turned estranged from “traditional” India. That means the imaginations of China and India deviate from each other, according to the Western spectrum of perception and emotion of the “Oriental”. There is no doubt that the “Oriental” country China remains countless “exoticism”, neither “modern” nor “traditional”, but a mixed state of the Oriental and the Western, of the modern and the traditional.

Economy beyond Politics: An Approach to Imagine China

“An approach to imagine China” is proposed by David Der-wei Wang, a famous foreign scholar on Sinology. However, its original meaning is “China viewed from overseas”, “an approach to ‘imagine’ how Chinese ‘imagine’ China from the Western view”.⁶ He continues dualism to imagine China holding that “If no city, whence the village cometh?”, “If no late Qing dynasty, whence May 4th cometh?” Though he tried hard to remain impartial to focus on the issue that “how China imagines herself” rather than “how the Western imagines China”, he could not escape the typical Western stereotype “If no Western, whence China cometh?” which prevails in his thoughts. This article aims to reverse this view in methodology: We should stand on the viewpoint of China to discuss how the Western imagine China, to distinct reoccurrence from fabrication, to ponder on the issues, attitudes and values of cultural China. This thesis may still be confined within dualism but raise an echo question of “If no Western, whence China cometh?” If we regard *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* as a particular example due to the semi-colonial and semi-feudal Shanghai in the 1930s, the movie *Mission: Impossible III* released in 2006 unrolls a panorama of new Shanghai which constitutes another juxtaposition or mixture of the modern and the traditional, bringing thinking mode and universality to the imagination of China in Western movies.

The story of *Mission: Impossible III* majorly takes place in the United States, the Vatican City and Shanghai, China. Unlike the traditional Britain in *Skyfall*, the United States in this film is composed of a capitalist modern city and a cozy town embracing Protestant ethics. The image of the United States is a reoccurrence of American reality excluding the issue of American imagination. Vatican City, an enclave, has soaked in a history of religion. The main scene was shot in the reception as a typical Western occasion for secular cultural exchange, deconstructing divinity of Vatican City from the inner part. Here the most important element in *Mission: Impossible III* is the imagination of China.

The story takes place in the 21st century Shanghai. Skyscrapers which frequently appear in Lujiazui Financial District serve as the landmark of Shanghai. The protagonist Ethen Hunt, an IMF agent passed “Fengshan Apartment”, “Hengshan Road Building”, “Dunan Middle Road Shunting Center” and an unspecified residence. These places, however, were surreal and mismatched: The first scene in Shanghai is “Fengshan Apartment” where we could find in the foreground a bird cage and in the long shot, Jin Mao Tower, Lujiazui Financial District and other skyscrapers. The apartment locates under Chengdu Elevated Road, a “grand building” to the east of Shanghai Television Station and China Merchants Tower. The scenes were mainly shot in the third floor corridor and the roof. Here the bird cage is more of a common customs in Beijing in old times than a lifestyle in Shanghai. The close shot presenting a rail draping clothes, panties and socks against the

⁶ David Der-wei Wang, *An Approach to Imagine China*, Joint Publishing, 1998, p. 361.

background of gorgeous Lujiazui. At this time, Ethan Hunt appeared at mid-shot on a rooftop platform where scatter plants, laundry, smokestacks and scaffoldings. Then the lens shift to the mid-shot, emerging a seven-or-eight-story curved staircase in the apartment across the platform and households drying quilts in a bustle. Obviously, *Mission: Impossible III* constructs a juxtaposed Shanghai image of marvelous skyscrapers and dingy lanes with draped laundry. The second important scene is Ethan Hunt's stealing of "Rabbit's Foot" in "Hengshan Road Building" and his jump from Bank of China Tower in Lujiazui Financial District. During his fleeing, the car glimpsed Chenghuang Temple in Puxi, Shanghai and came to "Dunan Middle Road Shunting Center" (actually a deserted construction site). As he delivered Rabbit's Foot to the meeting point, Ethan was tranquilized and brought to an unknown place. When he managed to escape and rescue his wife, the preset positions were "HAINING RD", "WUJIN RD", and "WUSONG RD" in Shanghai, but the actual shooting place is Xitang, a typical ancient town in Zhejiang.

We should not check the story on a map of Shanghai because in the movie Shanghai is just the place the story happens; meanwhile, we should not distinguish the connoted place and the denoted scene by analyzing the shooting place (for example, we should not criticize shooting a Shanghai scene in Xitang), but to treat the shooting scene as a "reoccurrence" of Shanghai (also, an imagination of Shanghai). Here the problem is, why *Mission: Impossible III* presents Shanghai from the third dimension "ancient town" besides "skyscraper" and "old-style apartment"? What approach to imagine Shanghai is applied in this Western movie? If we say "skyscrapers" represent market economy of Shanghai especially Pudong New Area in the 1990s, then the "old-style apartments" reveal the picture of collective workers' dormitories after the foundation of New China and the crowded Shanghai citizen life in the 1980s. Here we could understand that the "ancient town" is the remains of traditional China of Ming and Qing Dynasty before Shanghai's opening-up. The images of Shanghai which is constructed in *Mission: Impossible III* should be regarded as an effort to perceive and express Chinese historical culture in a comprehensive way.

Now let us return to the comparison of three different Chinese images with that in *Skyfall*. In *Mission: Impossible III*, the three images of Shanghai are all concrete: The "skyscraper" represented by Bank of China Tower raised its height because of Ethan Hunt's jump, added realism to the building because of Ethan Hunt's crash into the glass and slid on the sloping façade, and infused Shanghai in the movie vitality by presenting vehicle's steer and pedestrian's scatter horrified by Ethan Hunt's parachute fall (totally different with the extraction in *Skyfall*). The element of human permeates in this movie to emphasize daily life; even in the "old-style apartment" scene within a short time we could see women drying quilts in the opposite corridor and the bustle downstairs. Besides, the mismatched element "ancient town" is worthy of attention. Though Ethan Hunt flew over the rooftops, stone bridges and corridors, residents in the ancient town seem uninvolved: all of the strolling pedestrians, attracted tourists, and street vendors continued their concentrations. Conversely, despite the hurry, Ethan Hunt scarcely knocked into any pedestrian. After Ethan Hunt had rescued his wife, they also strolled leisurely in the ancient town which seems cozy and serene as usual. As for the imagination of China, *Mission: Impossible III* empathizes and sympathizes with Chinese to encounter all perspectives of Chinese culture in an impartial attitude, neither despising nor admiring. That's why *Mission: Impossible III* could gain universal praise among Chinese audience⁷.

⁷On November 30th 2005, Tom Cruise held a press in Shanghai and said, "*Mission: Impossible III* aims to show the globe a 'real, beautiful China'." (http://news.shm.com.cn/2005-12/02/content_1125866.htm) *Mission: Impossible III* has gained extraordinary welcome and praise from Chinese audience especially Shanghai audience in China for its impartial and equal cultural attitude towards China.

From the analysis above we could conclude that, “otherness” as the Western see, China tends to be imagined and constructed in different movies due to Western culture and need. To analyze these movies in an approach of cultural politics, we must adopt another dimension, that is, economic interest. Since the 1920s, the U.S. Department of Commerce has entrusted the embassies and consulates to conduct a thorough investigation into local film market, among which the first research report on China was published in 1927. China imported from Hollywood more than 200 movies by 1946. After 1949, American films were rejected by New China until the 1980s. Since 1994, American movies have been allowed to Chinese film market by “splitting” the box office, which restarted the importation of Hollywood movies. To cater to Chinese film market, Hollywood movies continuously integrated Chinese elements into their storyline. From *Mulan* to *Kung Fu Panda*, from Chen Chong and Cheng Long to Yang Ziqiong and Li Lianjie, from Jiangnan water towns to Shanghai the modern metropolis, Chinese audience has counter-experienced the “defamiliarization” of their own culture through Hollywood movies. In 2006, *Mission: Impossible III* gained 81.2 million box office in China, ranking the seventh among domestic movies and the third among imported movies, earning significant revenue in China. Although the film accomplished with 134 million North American box office and 263 million overseas box office, and a total of 397 million worldwide box office, it was still ranked as the worst in the series of "Mission Impossible" series. Here it is self-evident that economy and the market are still important factors to which Hollywood films should attach great importance. Hollywood spares no effort to cater to Chinese audience and Chinese market where American moviemakers could earn substantial potential interest. That’s a crucial reason why Western movies represented by Hollywood mean to hide their political bias but adopt a flattery attitude to Chinese culture.

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