

Viewing China from the “Screen”: An Analysis of Scenery Writing On a Chinese Screen

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Abstract: The duration around 1920s has witnessed a profound transition in Chinese history. During this period, quite a few writers at home and abroad have contributed their writing in diversified focuses to represent this change. As a distinguished English writer in the 20th century, Maugham is no exception. He is well known as an adept at analyzing multi-dimensional aspects of human nature, which is also employed to his exotic writing. To supplement the study of this front, the present paper takes a close reading of his travelogue *On a Chinese Screen*. By making an analysis of Maugham’s scenery writing, a tentative conclusion is that Chinese scenery images are glanced from screens, which is closely related to the impact of picturesque art and his identification with his homeland. It is hoped that the study would deepen readers’ understanding of Maugham’s exotic writing as well as their insights into the relationship between Chinese image writing and identification.

Keywords: Screen; Picturesque; Identification; Chinese Image; Maugham

1. Introduction

William Somerset Maugham, who was in his forties, embarked on a trip to China from December 1919 to April 1920. Upon his return, he penned the travelogue *On a Chinese Screen* (1922). Such contemporary writers as Lu Xun exposed the suffering of the Chinese people and tortured society through a train of works including *A Madman’s Diary* (1918), *Kong Yiji* (1919), *Storm in a Teacup* (1920), and *The True Story of Ah Q* (1921). Bertrand Russell studied China’s social and political issues in his *the Problem of China* (1920), and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa illustrated his criticism of China in a satirical tone in *Travel Notes of China* (1921). Distinct from them, Maugham avoided direct questioning of reality; rather he

ushered readers into a different China of the early 1920s.

In the travelogue, it is undeniable that specific features on consuls, taipans, missionaries, British-American tobacco company agents, missionary ladies and so on unveil Maugham’s shrewd understanding of human nature. However, a close reading of the text will unfold an antique image writing owing to his “highly developed visual sense” [1] and passionate interest in painting. The literary writing is dripping with best-known Chinese elements like the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, as well as highly carved Mahogany chairs, and Tri-colored pottery horse of Tang Dynasty which has “the grace and the exquisite modelling of a Greek work” [2]. It is worth nothing that these images of Chinese items are glimpsed through the screen.

2. Screens as Frames

As a typical item of classical Chinese furniture, screen is “an extremely active element in Chinese residential environment design and an important part of traditional Chinese architectural space” [3]. Maugham named his travelogue *On a Chinese Screen*, which highlights the elegant screen. He toured China during the middle period of the rule of the Northern Warlords (1912-1927). At that time, China suffered from oppression by both foreign powers and warlords. Declining economy and the destitute ensued. But these facts of people’s livelihood rarely entered Maugham’s literary space. Instead as a tourist, Maugham gazed the exotic scene “from a British aesthetic vision when they first traveled to China” [4]. He delineated his deep nostalgia for ancient China not least during the period between the Tang and Song dynasties. His particular visit to these highly recognizable Chinese symbols - alleys (*hutong* in Chinese), the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, and the Temple of Heaven demonstrated his preference for “transferring his nostalgia for ancient

civilizations to the land of China” [5]. According to *Supplement to the Evidential Commentary to the Shi Ming* by Wang Xianqian, a late Qing period scholar, “the term screen (*pingfeng* in Chinese name) functions as blocking (*ping*) the breeze (*feng*). The *yi* is placed behind to rely on” [6]. *Yi* hereby refers to the screen, which is used for blocking wind and dividing space. Deeply influenced by the post-Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, Maugham “strengthened the spatial consciousness in his works” [7] in the middle and late periods of his writings. The travelogue is no exception. The expert storyteller takes the screen as the title and carefully constructed 58 sketches of travel notes which are apart from each other as well as a part of the whole text. Virtually the travelogue seldom gets a direct mention of the screen except the second chapter *My Lady’s Parlour*. But deep down the text, the author mixes various landscapes in the chapters, rendering the the screen and the carefully woven text form a certain intertextuality in terms of structure. Similar to the blocking property of the screen, Maugham placed himself in the state of “distanced observation” [8]. Besides his five years’ experience as a medical student, his constrained style of writing is also related to his identity as a roamer, which could be encountered in the following three fronts. The first is the objective alienation caused by his incompetence in Chinese. Maugham boasted proficiency in English, French and German, knew a little bit of Italian, but did not know a little bit of Chinese. Therefore, Maugham was well acquainted with specific cultural circle to which he belonged, that is, a galaxy of westerners who came to China. There emerge westerners including missionaries, businessmen and politicians who have a voice in their exchanges, while most lower-class Chinese like coolies, trackers, rickshaw pullers are in silence. Hence his perspective on Chinese has arguably certain limitations. The second is the time limit. Maugham cast only a passing glance at China within four-month trip. The metaphor of the screen “provides self-justification for the author’s fleeting description” [9]. The last is his cognitive bias or even prejudice in culture, as evidenced by his understanding of opium den. Opium is incredibly devastating to the Chinese in history, and thus the opium den is naturally a negative

quarter. But in Maugham’s writing, it turned out to be a cheerful, comfortable and cosy spot. Although the ugly faces of Westerners’ prejudice against China were exposed against the antique China constructed by the screen, foreign tourists’ understanding of China including Maugham’s was inevitably orientalist in the early 20th century. For the writer, the scenery is glanced through a veil of exotic imagination.

As a carrier for poems and paintings, the screen provides a positive perspective not only from outside but also from inside. Between approaching and distancing, the text maintains a moderate tension, attracting readers to creep into the landscape of mountains and rivers on the screen.

3. Scenery Being Framed

Maugham once revealed his visit to China “on minds with preconceptions similar to ours; and thus we learn the ‘feel’ of that ancient and alien civilization” [1]. Chinese ink paintings such as flower-and-bird pictures and plum blossom pictures gradually visualize from the screen. Not only that, Maugham delineated many Chinese scenes in romance: rice fields cultivated by cows, the turbulent rapids of the Yangtze, the Coal Mountain overlooking the Forbidden City, the boat building that entrusted with Emperor Qianlong’s sentiments when the author has a sightseeing tour of China, the latter was involved in the era of war between the Northern Warlords. In stark contrast, these mountains and waters are present in highly tranquility and serenity, which is consistent with the author’s leisurely mood while traveling, and is also closely related to the influence of British painting art. Maugham’s acquaintance with and affection for the painting are clearly revealed in his early masterpieces. *Of Human Bondage* (1915) describes the painter El Greco in large parts through the male protagonist’s perspective. In *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) appeared Charles Strickland, the protagonist of the story, who gives up his wife, children, and career in order to paint. *On a Chinese Screen* has traces of author’s preference for painting, evidenced by the mention of the nineteenth-century British painter Luke Fildes, the British illustrator William Leech, the French classicist painter Jean Ingres, the Italian painter Raffaello Santi, and sentimental engravings -

The Soul's Awakening and other paintings. These cross-national and cross-genre artists and art forms stands out Maugham's broad artistic vision. A close reading would unmask Maugham's picturesque representation of the scenery under the manipulation of two dominant colors as blue and black.

As an aesthetic ideal, Picturesque originated in Italian and Dutch landscape painting in the 17th century. Further promoted by "Grand Tour", it was finally introduced into the UK in the 18th century and gradually "established itself there as a golden principle underlying the proper way of nature-seeing and nature representation" [10]. This aesthetic concept advocates the landscape should be presented as it is, stressing the roughness of nature [11]. It is worth mentioning that "screen" itself in the title of the travelogue is one of the keywords in picturesque aesthetics, which proves that the author embraced a British aesthetic vision when he visited China [4].

The picturesque nature of the scenery is highlighted in descriptions of Chinese rice fields. Against the background of the misty screen, the rice fields transition from the background to the foreground in diversified states as many as 16 times: a static presence, such as the rice fields at the foot of the mountain which "for the most part crescent shaped patches built on the slope of a hill, one below the other, so that they can be flooded" [2]. The missionary caught "a delightful glimpse of the broad river shining in the sun amid the exultant green of the padi fields" [2]. There are also dynamic interactions between living creatures and paddy fields. The coolies "trudges along the narrow causeway between the rice fields", and their "hurrying reflections in the padi water" [2]. A peasant toils with "thigh deep in water" and the water buffalo nearby "splashes sinister through the mud" [2]. A little black pig passes "along the causeway between the flooded padi fields" [2]. These picturesque writings on rice fields demonstrate Maugham's resonance with the realm of picturesque painting, and also make up his lack of knowledge beyond familiar areas.

In Maugham's creation, natural scenery is often associated with the generating of national emotions and the confirming of identity. "The waves thundered upon the tortured rocks. I felt a sudden exultation" [2]. The urge to be close to the sea may be one of

the reasons why Maugham chose the waterway to visit China. He traveled up 1,500 miles up the Yangtze River. In his intimate relationship with the water, he witnessed cormorants fishing, the mighty and swirling river, and heard strong songs of the river, high-pitched and powerful river chants, the sound of oars against the wooden pins, and the turbulence of rivers. The slow-paced journey brings the author a space for silent contemplation, and leads the readers to meet Captain Boots, the master of a little Chinese steamer on the Upper Yangtze. The sea-dog "looked the very image of those ancient fishermen that you see lunging about Grimsby docks" [2]. "Grimsby docks" is located on the northeast coast of England and one of the world's famous fishing ports in the 19th century. From the little ship which is "not so large as a penny steamer on the Thames" [2] to the state when the author "finds himself once more in the dingy alleys of a Channel port" [2], the spatially displaced boat scenes indicate Maugham's pining for his distant homeland. The silent image of the boat creates a sense of drifting away. The memory of his distant hometown triggers author's identification with the UK.

4. Images through Screens

Image is "a kind of translation of others, but also a kind of self-translation" [12]. In this sense, the landscaped image of a foreign country is the production organized by travelers' subjective intention. For the British, "there is no place like Britain where scenery is heritage" [13]. Therefore, penning exotic natural scenery is a vital way for the British in China to return to their hometown textually. Owing to his journey up the Yangtze River, Maugham could take a close look at the China's landscape. He employs domestication to delineate what he has seen. Domestication is a narrative strategy by "using the known to compare with the unknown, and using familiar things to compare with unfamiliar ones" [9]. The search for "similarity" also "the fixed narrative mode used by British travelers when describing 'picturesque' scenery" [14]. A typical example is the naming of scenery. China's landscapes are named after his native landscapes. The Chinese bamboos "look just like the hops of a Kentish field" [2]. The shining water in the rice fields does "like the chess-board in some Chinese Al lice in

Wondership” [2]. Even “the woodland odors are the same as those which steal up from the fat Kentish soil when you pass through the woods of Bleane; and nostalgia seizes you” [2]. Despite the fact that Maugham was born in Paris, he was orphaned at ten years old and then brought up by his uncle in Kent, a county in the South East England region. Based on this, Kent is not just an object space, but to a greater extent an emotional attachment. In *A Writer’s Notebook*, Maugham put frankly, “I have tried to analyse what this particular emotion in myself consists of. To me the very shape of England on the map is significant, and it brings to my mind pell-mell a hundred impressions...the pleasant winding roads of Kent” [15]. It can be seen that Maugham’s exotic writing not only participates in the expression of China’s local scenery, but also engages in the construction of the author’s identity as a British.

Given the fact that China is Maugham’s travel destination, this travelogue is teeming with fragments of Chinese scenery: dilapidated huts, dark recesses, declining temples, the raftered ceiling with its faded gold dragons, mahogany chairs with faded red leather, broken porcelain pieces, the dream of a Chinese palace, etc. These items invariably are endowed with a bleak, broken sense of disappearance, a display of sentiment. Between the visible scene and the invisible scene lies Maugham’s nostalgia for his hometown. Westerners in China in the travelogue often connect themselves with their hometown by reading *The Times* and listening to songs from London musicals, but what Maugham does is deeper and more emotional. In the carefully woven Chinese dream, Maugham’s homesickness swells, not only a lament for China’s declining imperial past, but also a lament for the British Empire. As he once admitted, “I am a British person, so I naturally have an inseparable connection with Britain” [16]. When Maugham made his way to the Yangtze River, it was not long after the end of the First World War. At that time, the UK was undergoing a relative decline. To be specific, around the 1890s, Britain was faced with “being caught up by the emerging United States and Germany in terms of economy” [17]. At the very beginning of the twentieth century, Britain was mired in the Boer War in South Africa. Coupled with the tragic deaths of a large number of soldiers and

civilians in World War I, Britain embarked on an irreversible process of decline. British diplomat Robert Morrell once said that “Today’s British national power has declined and receded” [17]. Therefore, Maugham has ulterior motives with his emphatic description of China’s decline; it lurks his regret and retrospection at the decline of his hometown.

It is worth mentioning that the scenery in the works include not only natural scenes, but also landscape paintings. The latter often turn up in the form of being possessed and stared at. During Maugham’s trip to China, he came into more and frequent contact with westerners in China. During his interactions with them, the writer beheld not a few Chinese collections, such as “a picture of some early dynasty of mountains seen through fleecy clouds” [2] collected by the cabinet minister, and old Chinese pictures “hung on the yellow walls” [2] owned by Mr. Wingrove, a missionary on a little hill. As the possessors of the paintings, these two typical westerners in China are elaborately woven into the narrative of the text and become living targets for reflection on human nature. The cabinet minister is a presence of hypocrisy; he is seemingly sad for ruthlessly destroyed Chinese civilization but in fact he is a corrupt and derelict villain, “a master of the squeeze” [2]. Similarly, missionary Wingrove is a figure like Mr. Ye who professes love of what one really fears. He deceptively cares about Chinese items, but his eyes show “a flash of icy hatred” [2]. Although these landscape paintings are lack of temporal dimension in a few strokes, their presence especially the state of being possessed by negative westerners in China implies that China was plundered by imperial powers at that time. Therefore, the writer’s sympathy for China’s crisis is unveiled.

5. Conclusion

The year 1919 witnessed a profound transition of Chinese history. Travel prose achieved unprecedented prosperity during this period. Against this grand narrative background, *On a Chinese Screen* provides readers with a vivid cross-cultural image of China. Owing to Maugham’s perspective, China’s scenery has acquired a defamiliarized sense of strangeness, which satisfies the curiosity of many foreign readers. In addition, Maugham’s adept analysis of westerners in China who possess Chinese

paintings reveals his realistic concern for China's crisis. That may be one of the reasons why this work remains popular among readers to this day.

However, the constant presence of the screen as well as its image reminds readers of the blocking power of this work. In other words, Maugham examines China through a "screen", a Claude Glass: the screen is like a painting frame through which images of various scenery take shape. Through the screen shaped by Maugham, what readers see are processed images of China: landscapes of picturesque features, landscape paintings that are gazed at, and landscapes with inter-textual relationships. The scene involving the self is beheld from a personal perspective. Under the scene involving the self, the writer incorporates personal feelings into the scenery he creates. From this point of view, in the tense journey of immersion and sobriety, it is not easy for Maugham to escape from the novelty mentality of Orientalism, to avoid the pride and prejudice in cross-cultural communication, and to free himself from the memory of hometown and identification with his own country. But overall Maugham is a sincere writer; he exploits the screen to voice his cognitive limitations in understanding China, leaving a reference and mirror for Chinese readers to examine China through the eyes of others. His creation also provides a rare opportunity for the fusion of horizons and exchanges across cultures.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the 2021 college-level Young Teacher Research Fund Project (kx210605).

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