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An imagined cultural identity

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In 1938, the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar published a collection of short stories under the title *Nouvelles Orientales* (English: *Oriental Tales*). The tales are freely developed from the myths, legends, fables, ballads, and classical literature of the ‘East’ from a Westerner’s perspective. Yourcenar deliberately applies the narrative form of folklore in her retelling of those tales. ‘How Wang-fo Was Saved’ is the first story in this collection, a fantastic tale positioned in an ancient Chinese setting. As a teacher-researcher and a Chinese (or an ‘oriental’) myself, I wanted to investigate whether Yourcenar’s storytelling could survive the critique expressed by Edward Said in his analysis of imperialist discourse and Orientalism, and how young readers in contemporary China would react to ‘the Chinese’ as creatively re-imagined by a twentieth-century French writer. I taught this story using participatory drama with groups of Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students in their 20s. Reflecting on their interactions and improvisations in the drama class, I discovered that the understanding of their tradition, or awareness of their cultural identity, expressed by this young generation of educated Chinese, was a complex phenomenon. It has been influenced by the collective memory of Chinese society and the rise of nationalism, as well as by popular culture, especially film and TV. In this article, I will briefly analyse how classroom drama unveiled those issues, investigate the subtleties underneath them, and discuss what teachers might learn from this cross-cultural case study, especially in the context of globalisation.

The Kantian artist in the Chinese context

Wang-fo, the protagonist of the tale, is a perfect portrait of a Kantian artist, devoting his entire life to the pursuit of pure aesthetic bliss, completely detached from sensual gratification, material needs, and moral concerns. Interestingly, however, this unworldly artist is placed in the ancient world of China. The exotic setting lures readers, including the Chinese, to trace the origin of the mysterious artist in real history. According to Yourcenar’s authorial explanation in the postscript of *Oriental Tales*, ‘How Wang-fo Was Saved’ derives from a Chinese Taoist fable. Yet both the students and I failed to find the ‘real’ Wang-fo, let alone the Taoist fable which inspired Yourcenar. She had no intention to make a counterfeit copy of any Chinese painter. The ancient Chinese setting is nothing but the stage, the background,
and the atmosphere of her own story. In the drama activities and subsequent discussion, the 
students implicitly recognised that Wang-fo is less Chinese than European. They shared 
their understanding of Wang-fo by referencing the nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement 
and its famous maxim ‘art for art’s sake’. The artists they mentioned included Oscar Wilde, 
Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso. It seemed at first that these young 
‘readers’ did not constrain their interpretation within the Chinese context and readily used 
a ‘cross-cultural’ perspective to understand the character and the text. However, further 
analysis revealed deeper complexities.

**Language, symbol, and cultural pastiche**

Language was an essential material that the students used to build an ancient Chinese at-
mosphere. In a ‘writing in role’ activity, they were asked to produce a speech intended to 
persuade the emperor to release Wang-fo. They wrote in different voices—as the emperor’s 
concubine, the prime minister, the empress dowager, and the emperor’s eunuch. The dis-
course of their speeches showed that they were trying to imitate a particular written vernac-
ular, in particular the language of the classic eighteenth-century Chinese novel *Dream of the 
Red Chamber*. Then I asked them to make the scene of ‘persuading the emperor’: they were to 
read their writings out in role. Most of the student participants performed gestures of ancient 
etiquette to accompany their speech. In other words, they were making a conscious effort 
to work on a discourse that fitted their understanding of a suitable ancient Chinese setting.

In other drama activities, the students presented more fragments of Chinese traditional 
culture. For example, in an activity in which they imagined completing Wang-fo’s last paint-
ing, they used cultural symbols drawn from different Chinese classical literary sources. More 
than one group drew peach blossoms, commonly appreciated in China as a symbol of utopia 
as related in *Peach Blossom Spring* by Tao Qian (352–427 A.D.). When the students were in 
role as the prime minister and the empress dowager debating with the emperor, they referred 
to ‘ren (仁)’ and ‘xiao (孝)’—the fundamental virtues of Confucianism. These fragments of 
Chinese cultural tradition were absent in Yourcenar’s story, and thus they were presenting it 
within a new, layered collage of ancient China.

Narrative fiction is in essence the art of illusion. ‘The kingdom of Han’ in ‘How Wang-fo 
Was Saved’ is not a geographical or administrative area that can be found in Chinese his-
tory. Yourcenar created an imagined China in the original text. But what about the ‘China’ 
completed by the students in the drama class? Inspired by Fredric Jameson’s5 argument on 
’nostalgia film’, I would describe the students’ use of traditional Chinese elements as ‘cultural 
pastiche’. After analysing the discourse and other Chinese elements in their drama exercises, 
I found the fragmentary materials they used derived principally from mass media—historical 
films, period drama, fantasy novels, and even comic books. In later interviews, the students 
confirmed this and explained that popular culture had a more important impact on their 
cultural identity than their school education; their literary and historical education had only 
provided them with ‘names, facts, and texts’, whereas they saw ‘real human beings and their 
life stories’ in popular culture, especially in dramatised productions. Comparing these with 
real history, they claimed that they were fascinated by the ‘feel’ or the ‘atmosphere’ of the 
past. This ‘cultural China’ of popular culture, however, lacks historic authenticity, being 
merely a mosaic formed from simple, Chinese cultural items; or rather it is a sort of ship in a 
bottle that one might find in a souvenir shop—a sealed, unreal world, a highly romanticised 
object for the gaze. In their drama exercises, drawing freely from pastiche and fragments 
of popular culture, these young Chinese were, in effect, creating a ‘pastiche’ of a ‘pastiche’.
The East and the West

The students’ responses seem to show a strong awareness of their own cultural identity. Ironically, this cultural identity did not appear to be shaped by any understanding of a complicated national history, but rather by nostalgic fashion. This symptomatic phenomenon would seem to comply with Ernest Renan’s statement—‘Forgetting... is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation’.5 Benedict Anderson has argued that a nation is always conceived as ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’.6 A nation is, according to Anderson, an imagined community. In contemporary China, popular culture is re-establishing the illusion of an ancient China for modern Chinese to celebrate, presenting them with a communal, romanticised version of their past, a collective nostalgia serving to form an imaginary cultural identity or comradeship.

In this case study, these students could be seen to share a common fantasy of a ‘cultural China’. This comradeship, established by mass media, especially dramatised productions, uses stereotypical representations of the past, replacing ‘real’ history for a consumer society. Such a comradeship minimises the specificities of historical and geographical variety in order to produce a generalised, reimagined national character. As a consequence, these young collectors of atmosphere failed to present any insightful argument drawn from their own culture. In a role-play activity, Wang-fo meets various characters in ancient Chinese society. All the Buddhist monks they played can quote the well-known Buddhist statement in The Diamond Sutra—‘All phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble and a shadow, like dew and lightning. Thus should you meditate upon them’.7 But none of them entered into any satisfactory dialogue with Kantian aesthetics from any perspective that could be said to represent real Chinese Buddhist culture. In fact, no matter how long this drama activity lasted, the valid communication between the Aesthete and the Buddhist stopped when the quote was finished, and any of the fragmentary quotes and cultural symbols the students drew upon were only serving to convey atmospheric and stylistic peculiarities.

Moreover, I noticed that this comradeship or ‘cultural identity’ created by mass media also draws a line between Chinese (or the East) and the Other (or the West) in minds of these young, well-educated students. They never saw Wang-fo as a ‘Chinese’ artist, and some criticised Yourcenar for writing a ‘purely Western’ tale under the skin of Westerners’ ‘oriental fantasy’. Presumption of the essential alterity of the concept of ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ was commonly found throughout the data drawn from this case study, even though the classification they used was problematic.8 It maximised a sense of difference between China and the Occident and minimised the diversity of Chinese cultures at different historical periods and geographical points. Diminishing the complexity of Chinese culture has provided people with a sense of belonging which binds them together, but at the same time, it has portrayed ‘Chinese’ as a stereotype, a simplified image of the ‘Other’ different from ‘Westerners’. Therefore, we see the biggest irony in the students’ own words, as their own performances in the drama exercise deserve the same criticism they imposed on Yourcenar. Their own written texts that they attempted in the old language committed various grammatical errors, and their performed etiquette was full of mistakes. The students were celebrating their own exotic fantasy, seeming to indicate, in the famous words of L. P. Hartley, that, indeed, ‘the past is foreign country’.9 They did not realise that the otherness of the imagined ancient China that they were celebrating was, in fact, itself a variation of Orientalism.

‘How Wang-fo Was Saved’ was written to present Yourcenar’s own thoughts about beauty, not about any authentic atmosphere of Chinese culture. I devised certain drama exercises which aimed to establish a conversation between different cultures on this particular topic. To some extent, this attempt failed because it requires the kind of solid knowledge of
history and culture that the students did not possess. However, the ‘cultural identity’ they performed in the workshop did open up more topics worthy of exploration. I would hope that the findings I discussed above might be of interest to anyone working on reforming interdisciplinary pedagogy in general education programmes. My suggestion is that classroom drama should not replace conventional pedagogies such as lecture and seminar but rather should work to complement this traditional form, preferably as an introduction to them, followed up with studies of original literary texts, historical knowledge, or artworks, which can be informed by reflecting back on the drama work. If we, as individuals, have always been rearranging the fragments of our memories, so has the nation been reshaping our collective experience. But hearing talk of being a ‘Chinese’, or a ‘Japanese’, or a ‘British’, we must beware, as any cultural identity without knowledge of a complicated history is essentially meaningless. As Neitzsche reminds us:

We need history… we need it for life and for action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and from action, or for merely glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to serve history only insofar as it serves living.10

Notes

1 In Yourcenar’s retelling of the Chinese tale, Wang-fo is a genius whose great artistry makes people believe that he has the magic to bring paintings to life. Yet the beauty of his art also drives the emperor to despair for he cannot bear that the country he reigns over is not as beautiful as the world of art created by Wang-fo. When he tries to put the artist to death as a punishment, Wang-fo walks into an unfinished painting and disappears.

A famous children’s tale called ‘The Magic Paintbrush’ by Hong Xuntao has a similar storyline. But this story was published in the 1950s, about 20 years after ‘How Wang-fo Was Saved’ was written. In ‘The Magic Paintbrush’, Liang, a poor orphan boy, is granted a paintbrush by an old man which can turn everything he draws into reality. The greedy emperor arrests Liang and forces him to paint a money tree. Liang draws it, but in the middle of a sea. The emperor takes a dragon boat to sail to the money tree, whereupon Liang draws a storm which drowns the emperor.

2 It is based on Mandarin Chinese used in novels in about the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries.

3 Ren (仁): humanity, humaneness, goodness, benevolence, or love; xiao (孝): filial piety.

4 In his talk ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’ (Whitney Museum Lecture, 1982), Jameson argues that pastiche is the imitation of a peculiar style, without the subtleties of parody, such as ulterior motive, satirical impulse, and sense of humour. Pastiche is a neutral mimicry which aims to convert an atmosphere of ‘pastness’ into the attributes of fashion. It is an aesthetic mode commonly used in commercial art, especially nostalgia films. Accessible online from Postmodernism and Consumer Society.

5 Ernest Renan made this statement in his speech ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?’. See Nation and Narration, ed. H. K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.


7 In Chinese: 一切有为法，如梦幻泡影，如露亦如电，应作如是观.

8 The students claimed that an artist with such a disinterested view of ethics would never be valued in Chinese art history, for China is a society that has been dominated by Confucianism for thousands of years. Yet before we talk about Chinese culture, we need to remember that Confucianism is not the only philosophy that has influenced Chinese civilisation, and even Confucianism has had different impacts at different historical periods. And in real Chinese history, artists obsessed with art do exist, such as Gu Kaizhi (顾恺之) and Emperor Huizong (宋徽宗).
