

Daniel Vukovich: China and orientalism: Western knowledge production and the P.R.C.

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Abstract This is a review of a book by Vukovich (2012) on the Orientalising practices of Western scholarship on China. The author of the book under review considers much of the latter scholarship to be biased and based on a myth of “becoming-the-same.” The writer of the book review introduces the book, chapter-by-chapter, and critically evaluates it.

Keywords Orientalism · Vukovich · Intercultural communication · Cultural representation

The book which is under review here is an example of the continuing reinterpretation both of the Western academic tradition, and of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, which latter has contributed so much to problematizing the views of Western scholars and the relation of their scholarship to politics. Responses to *Orientalism*, of course, have ranged from highly critical (e.g. Ibn Warraq) to uncritical (e.g. vulgarised and name-dropping social-media appeals to Said’s book). However, there are also those, such as Chen Xiaomei (author of *Occidentalism*) who have treated Said as having something important to say, but without treating him as an August sage or inspired prophet. And Vukovich’s “China and Orientalism” is a book falling into this same third category; a book partly inspired by Said’s text, but not uncritically deferential to the same.

If it is not too much of an exaggeration, I would like to characterise Vukovich’s book as founded on the idea that the process of “Othering” which Said attributes to Western representations of the “Orient” cannot be considered as the primary guiding principle of the representation of China in modern Chinese Studies in the West. Rather, Vukovich argues that modern Chinese Studies, the successor of the earlier Western tradition of classical Sinology, is a discipline which practices a

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homogenising logic. That is, China is characterised not only as Other, but as (in Vukovich's memorable words) "becoming-the-same." Hence, some Westerners take sides and decide who is "Our Chinese," and who is not; who will lead China into "normality," and who threaten to atavistically drag it back into the past.

Clearly, Vukovich's arguments in this regard appear influenced by Western scholars, such as Fredric Jameson and Foucault (p. xiii); but we can perhaps also hypothesise a degree of influence from Chinese Communist tradition. One example might be the idea that "peaceful evolution" into capitalism is a disaster which Westerners dream of coercing and/or tricking the Chinese into accepting; or, less psychologically, (some?) Westerners act as though they do. Hence, Vukovich considers many Western scholars to be complicit with the Realpolitik of governments which attempt to portray China as becoming more like "us." This guiding thesis of the role of "becoming-the-same" in Chinese Studies in the West enable the author to attention to the problems of positionality that are involved in Western cultural representation, without glibly suggesting any easy "solutions" to these difficulties, or merely reducing questions of epistemic warrant to questions of positionality.

The book commences with a long epigram from Said's *Orientalism*, where Said asserts that cross-cultural representation is not a direct reflection of reality, but a "conversion;" and that while such conversion may be "perfectly natural," the Orientalist is always involved in such a (problematic) act of conversion. This leads into the preface, where Vukovich reflects on his "circuitous route" (p. xii) into Chinese Studies; Vukovich appears not to have been initially trained in Area Studies. But at university Vukovich came to recognise, as he continues to do, "what people are able to say about the P.R.C as well as *how* they do so" (ibid.). Western scholars have been in a position to exert their "positional superiority" in the direction of Spivakian "sanctioned ignorance" (ibid). Even now, "the question of China and its representation—the knowledge problem—is still not an objective or disinterested one. And it cannot be" (p. xiii). Yet, in acknowledging this, Vukovich does not aim to "offer a full-on defense of the Mao era and revolution and as a whole..." (p. xv). But he does wish to challenge the dominant dismissive attitude towards these.

Chapter One is the first detailed discussion of Vukovich's "becoming-the-same" thesis. Vukovich discusses the periodisation of Chinese studies in the West, from classical Sinology through to the current period. Vukovich is keen to stress that the transition from the classical Sinological tradition to modern post-1949 Area Studies has not involved a radical departure from colonising assumptions. Nowadays, scholars may be less overtly patronising or impolite than in the past, but we have not renounced our tendency to sacrifice critical empathy to our own prejudices about China. The author aims his criticism at a wide range of phenomena that he deems to be either, at best, pernicious tendencies; or at best, failed promises (so far): postcolonial critique; the theorisation of Occidentalism or of totalitarianism; postmodernism; dismissive attitudes towards native Chinese scholarship; uncritical attitudes towards Chinese dissidents. Vukovich makes reasonable attempts to avoid a merely dismissive approach, and attempts to determine the specificity of each of his targets, rather than firing random shots into the darkness.

Chapter Two discusses Tiananmen 1989 and the co-optation of this tragic event by Western scholars. Vukovich does not primarily focus on evaluating Tiananmen in a positive or negative manner; rather, he is concerned to discuss the distortions of Western scholarship. Vukovich believes that the view of many Westerners on this event is woefully simplistic, and that one cannot simply say that the protests were as an example, once more, of “becoming-the-same,” a mere repudiation of China’s supposed refusal to join modern “normality.” One senses Vukovich’s evident frustration not only with Area Studies scholars such as Geremie Barmé, but also with notable scholars from outside Chinese Studies, such as Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben.

Chapter Three is a chapter on the “demonization” of Maoist discourse. Vukovich stresses that not only have many Western scholars been biased against Maoist discourse and the political achievements of the Maoist period; they have also not paid due attention to works by Western scholars which have provided a more nuanced view. According to the author, Mao has even been likened to hated figures who have little relationship to China, while the Cultural Revolution has been likened to the Holocaust. Vukovich considers such discussions of Maoism to be examples of “moral equivalence.” I am not fully convinced that these juxtapositions necessarily imply an assumption of moral equivalence as such, and at some stage I would like to conduct an alternative interpretation elsewhere of some of the passages to which Vukovich alludes. However, Vukovich is correct to warn of the tendency to treat the Maoist period and Maoist discourse as merely evil and disastrous.

Chapter Four concerns representations of the Great Leap Forward. Vukovich believes that there has been an uncritical acceptance of the higher estimates, rather than the lower estimates, of the number of people who died in the famines of the Great Leap Forward. He is also critical of what he considers to be the *ad hominem* foregrounding of the perceived person and character of Chairman Mao in Western discussion, whereby other relevant causal factors are not given due weight. Vukovich attributes good intentions to those who were responsible for the Great Leap Forward, and emphasises positive aspects of the period, such as the gendered aspects and the provision of childcare. Vukovich then criticises inappropriate usage of statistics in discussions of the Great Leap Forward, as well as what he considers to be sensationalist accounts of the famine, such as those by Jasper Becker (*Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine*) and Frank Dikötter (*Mao’s Great Famine*). Vukovich is not satisfied with such books; he rejects what he considers to be the tendency to treat local tragedies or misdeeds as convenient metonymical figures of the whole of China in the period.

Chapter Five focuses on Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II*. Once more, Vukovich appeals to the idea of “moral equivalence” as a key element of Western misrepresentation of China. This chapter may appear less convincing to some readers, as *Mao II* is not a serious academic work, but a novel. Might it be that Vukovich demands too much accountability from this literary text, or perhaps a wrong kind of accountability? Does the juxtaposition in the novel of Warhol’s painting *Mao II*, a fictional Lebanese terrorist group, Marxism and radical Islamism really represent “an abstract and reductive yoking together of radically different—

but all non-white—groups, cultures and nations in time” (p. 89)? It is difficult to say a priori, but the author is concerned to make his case regarding what he apparently considers to be the novel’s implicit distrust of non-Westerners. For Vukovich, the novel portrays non-Westerners as collectivist in character, as a threat to complacent views regarding individual autonomy. In keeping with this, Vukovich appears dismissive of the “Cold War” tropes that appear in the novel, such as China as a closed, dogmatic and top-down society; also showing concern at what he apparently deems to be DeLillo’s ignorance of the subject matter. Vukovich appears convinced that DeLillo cannot use “art for art’s sake” as a get-out-of-jail-free card for Orientalising China. Admittedly, the author, in this chapter, perceptively uncovers the layers of Western prejudice about China that are “represented” in this novel; however, I was left dissatisfied by what appears to be a degree of reluctance on the author’s part to distinguish between artistic representation and serious academic/non-fiction representation, as two very different strategies of portraying China. Perhaps some scholars, one day, will engage in more detail with this question, as well as related ones such as the potential implications of fictional characters speaking “in character” in an Orientalising manner.

Chapter Six concerns Orientalism in the study of Chinese cinema. Vukovich discusses at length the film *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, which was “co-produced by many well-established China experts” (p. 102). Vukovich considers the film elitist both in terms of the words of the script, and in its reliance on “elite ‘dissident’ intellectuals and a few of the student leaders, but zero ordinary workers students” (p. 103). The author feels that the Chinese are patronised as subservient and slavish in mentality, and (once more) merely ripe for co-optation into the “normal” liberal-democratic order. He argues that scholars such as Paul Clark or Chris Berry characterise Chinese cinema as having experienced a long exodus in the Maoist period, until political reform facilitated a renewal of creativity; even though, according to the author, the more recent aesthetic spectacles familiar to and beloved by so many Western viewers are not necessarily highly valued or widely viewed in China itself. Vukovich himself is unwilling to dismiss films from the Maoist period as mere junk, as mere asinine propaganda; according to his understanding, the films from this period provide perspectives on (for example) Maoist education that represent true alternatives to dominant Western views of Maoism. The author also challenges what he considers to be arbitrary interpretations of the films *Yellow Earth*, *To Live* and *In the Heat of the Sun*. For Vukovich, these films should not be considered as mere politically-correct (in either direction) artistic polemics; they are nuanced and ambivalent works.

Chapter Seven concludes the book. Vukovich returns to his thesis of “becoming-the-same,” and expresses his desire to consider both how Western knowledge of China is “capitalist” in nature, and how “reductive, tendentious, or often sheerly ideological accounts of China seem true and real to so many” (p. 127). He discusses the work of various prominent non-Chinese Studies scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe, Agamben, Hardt and Negri and Žižek. A wide array of criticisms is directed at these scholars. For example, Laclau and Mouffe are represented as unduly dismissive of Maoism, while Agamben is considered to display insufficient historical understanding of Tiananmen 1989. The author appears Hardt and Negri’s

representation of the same event in a manner that makes them appear abstract and simplistic in their approach; while Vukovich's reading of Žižek's perhaps implies a certain carelessness on the part of the latter, and even suggests that "some" Žižek falls into "a dressed-up "vulgar" Marxism" (p. 134). The author is concerned at how Western scholars often appear to reluctant to consult serious "heterodox, alternative and critical" texts; texts of many have even been translated into English. Vukovich proceeds to argue that modern Sinological-orientalism is not merely a "variant of Eurocentrism or simply chauvinist scholarship," but complicity with the "global capitalist totality" (p. 143).

Here, we meet with a certain key difficulty. Ironically, Vukovich appears to believe that post-Maoist Party members are engaged in collusion and collaboration with dominant Westerners, and seems to represent China as subjected to "this same history of capitalist expansion and accumulation by dispossession" (p. 143). Thus, in the end, Vukovich himself cannot avoid a colonising gesture; to frame the Reform and Opening Up period as "the genuinely remarkable, even epochal but brutally inegalitarian rise of post-Mao China" (ibid.) is not merely a backhanded compliment, but representative of Vukovich's tendency to occasionally risk overcompensating for the prejudices of Western scholars. It is only fair to recognise two facts. Firstly, many women in China (not only men) have forms of liberty that were unthinkable a few generations ago (and in the case of gay women and men, only one generation ago). Secondly, the Reform and Opening Up itself has probably, to some extent, facilitated either *de jure* and/or *de facto* recognition of such liberties. But Vukovich appears unable to fully apply to the Reform and Opening Up period the same open-minded mindset he brings to Maoist China.

This makes one wonder whether Vukovich, himself, has to some extent been caught in a dream of China; not a dream of "becoming-the-same," but of remaining different; of a strong and defiant China, a "Third World" China that is oppositional to Western hegemony. The grave irony is that throughout the book, one sometimes feels that Vukovich either denigrates post-Mao China (as here) or is somewhat uncritical of Maoist China; such as when he attributes good faith to those who planned the Great Leap Forward, and thus risks falling into the liberal-corporatist view that good intentions are at least as important, if not more so, than positive political effects. I do not wish to overemphasise this point, because I believe Vukovich has to a significant extent avoided mere apologetics; but according to my understanding, he has not fully and at all times escaped the temptation to counter excessive uncharitableness with excessive charitableness. But this is only to be expected, given the difficult of the task he has set himself of challenging the whole Western tradition of Chinese Studies. We cannot always assume that we know for certain whether Vukovich is challenging Western scholars primarily on factual grounds, in terms of framing, or in terms of positionality; but this is an inevitable difficulty in this topical domain.

In conclusion, there is much to respect in Vukovich's book. The thesis of "becoming-the-same," while original, is convincing, as well as demonstrating a critical attitude towards Said's "Othering" thesis. Vukovich appears not to be overawed by well-respected Western scholars, and refuses to show any form of deference that would (I presume) be against his conscience. The book is effective

and perceptive in its criticism of naïve, simplistic, or even irresponsible texts by Western scholars. Yet, as already suggested above, it sometimes feels as though some of Vukovich's attempts to challenge chauvinism, carelessness or ignorance by Western scholars are excessive, and risk merely inverting the problematic. In fairness, it is surely extremely difficult to criticise some of the tendencies to which the author rightly objects, without exaggerating and appearing to merely postulate the opposite of the dominant opinion. I certainly feel that it would be unduly simplistic to represent Vukovich as writing mere apologetics. Ultimately, the book is not merely a useful addition to the literature of the Orientalism/Occidentalism debate (although it is this), but also has a certain originality and individual character. However, the reader would be well advised not to suspend her or his usual critical judgment, as the book itself, like the Western scholars criticised therein, is not free of representations which are themselves problematic; whether these be representations of Western scholars, or of Chinese people and Chinese history (both Maoist and post-1979).

And I would like to raise one final point. This book has focused on Western scholarship of China, and related such scholarship to the dominant role of Western economic and political power in the world. This is acceptable, in itself. But it would be good for other scholars to widen the scope of the discussion to non-Western academic representations of China; and in turn, to consider the quite different power relations to which the academic traditions in question must be related. This could include not only the traditions of economically and politically powerful agents such as the Soviet Union or Japan; it would also be very pleasing to see discussions about the academic representation of China by what are (admittedly controversially) considered by some to be "Third World" nations. At times, both Westerners and Chinese have spoken of the world in dualistic terms: the West and China, or even the West and an unproblematised "East." And, as we are speaking the problematisation of abstract or quasi-abstract entities, differences in the representation of China *within* the various countries of the West could also be considered.

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest in this book review.

Ethical integrity The research conducted here is in keeping with the law of my country (the UK).

Reference

Vukovich, D. (2012). *China and orientalism: Western knowledge production and the P.R.C.* Oxon and New York: Routledge.