

## Yeast and Its Meaning Travel in China

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The post colonial Chinese national identity is legitimized through appropriations of Victorian literature and culture. This idiosyncratic “modern” national rhetoric is supposed to be time honored and timeless, but the children it breeds turn out to be neither rightfully Victorian nor indigenously Chinese. Adopting the concept of the “meaning travel”, this essay intends to give an alternative perspective to examine the Chinese discursive practice of the Victorian literature. While intending to prove the “Chinese character” by setting out what values showed in the Victorian novel *Yeast* China is now short of, the Chinese readers add a fugue motif in the fable of modern China’s revitalization.

*Keywords:* Yeast; Meaning Travel; China

### Introduction

“The trouble with the En ... english is that their hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don’t know what it means.”—by Salman Rushdie in *the Satanic Verses*.

The articulated centrality of the west has nearly penetrated into every aspect of Chinese experiences with the modernization of Chinese society beginning in the early 20th century. In order to reconstruct its idiosyncratic identity after the foundation of new People’s Republic of China, the nation, willy-nilly, has to find social-economical examples, which paradoxically, always turn out to be the west. Various forms of consumptions of the Victorian culture are in part the fantasy products based on selective remembering of the past. By surpassing the Victorian history, the CPC regime of China is expected to represent itself with potentially reactionary<sup>1</sup>. The east versus the west paradigm presupposes the cultural term China as one part of the world culture as a whole, yet it fails to explain the ambiguous formations of “modern” cognitions in the global context.

Edward Said’s “travel theory” introduces the concept of cross cultural literary practice, in which the fluidity of knowledge transfer is highly emphasized. In terms of creative adoption and appropriation, Said sets a universal framework of critique. However, it is intriguing to observe that in this set of framework, the theory always responses to the social context

that never stops modifying. The travel theory has the atrophy in nature when explicating further inquiries such as what are the vehicles of the travel, which subjects drive the time machine etc. It is worth noting that in many regions in the world like China, the English language shall always be far from being important compared to the native languages, the foreign terms such as culture, modernity, nation, religion have their magnificent fermentation due to systematic conspiracies from the local initiatives.

Many critics have noticed the “allez-retour” feature of the meaning formations of western episteme. The characteristic cultural relocation finds its evidences in terms of the “global ecology of Victorian literature” (Gagnier, 2008; Gagnier & Delveux, 2006). What Julliet John says about the “global Dickens” study also sheds light on a critical understanding of the global Victorian study that “marks a return to scholarship as dialogue, dialogue that includes languages other than English, media other than books, and cultural institutions other than universities” (John, 2012: p. 502). This essay shall focus more on the ecological consumptions of the Victorian novel *Yeast* (1851 by Charles Kingsley). The bi-lateral meaning transfer suggests a translated Chinese national identity that could not be simplified into the dominance-resistance landscape in the center of the risky field of the west and the east.

Researchers have focused more on the intellectuals’ processing of the western discourses while neglecting the circulation of these verbal practices in the non-elite common mass. Valerie Sanders argues that films and literature are significant agents fostering contemporary students’ understanding of the Victorian age (Sanders, 2007), the common mass’ consumptions of the Victorian culture bear sharper transparency of the legitimacy of western discourses. In the following essay, one shall analyze the non-elite Chinese readership on *Yeast*. The reading space becomes “a text, a commodity, a discourse, and a piece of international cultural capital” (Jordan, 2011: p. 6) in which a paradoxical Chinese identity is “translated” by means of power reconfiguration, productive distortion and parodic imitation of

<sup>1</sup>The landscape of the imaginative construction on Victorian age in China since 1978 can be seen in the following works: Gao, Debu. “The Middle Department and Interim Employment in English Industrialization.” *Journal of Southeast University (Philosophy and Social Science)* Vol. 115.16. 2003: 44-47; He, Liping. “On the Female British’s Leisure Activities on the First Half of the Nineteenth Century.” *Collection of Women’s Studies* Vol. 13. 2005: 21-29; Sun, Dongbo. “The Government in the British Urbanization in the Victorian Age.” *Journal of Yuncheng University*. Dec 2005: 66-68; Tang Maolin, and Xiaohong Li. “Apprehend the Working Condition of Factory Workers during Industrial Revolution in Great Britain—Compare Marx’s and Wren’s Discussion.” *Journal of Anhui Agri. Sci.* Vol. 34.10. 2006: 2279-2280.

the novel.

Such characteristic readership is a counter discourse of the grand narrative of China's revitalization. Detailed interpretations on Kingsley's utopian imagination of harmonious Asia shall be illustrated firstly in the following essay; Chinese readers' disenchantment of the "harmonious Asia" shall be analyzed secondly. The unconscious acceptance of western values such as "culture," "religion", "otherness" makes coded split identity that adds a fugue motif in the narrative of China's revitalization. At the same time, Kingsley's "harmonious Asia" finds its new performance in Chinese readership. A brief archeology of China's processing of western values encourage one to think about what Amanda Anderson holds as the fundamental cultural roots that shape today's history (Anderson, 2005: p. 14). The perspective of bi-lateral meaning travel of *Yeast* offers a "critical paradigm precisely because it blurs the distinctions between criticism and creativity, with each becoming a reflection on self and other" (Llewellyn, 2008: p. 71).

### "Harmonious Asia" in *Yeast*

The imagination of a "harmonious Asia" is a crucial mediation for one to analyze *Yeast's* theme "regeneration," which yet, has not been put into critical study in its own right. Philip Davis argues in *The Victorian* that the Victorian age is the threshold of modern civilization, being a "transformation of old traditions within new context". John McGowan also says it is from the Victorian intellectuals Mill, Carlyle, Arnold and Ruskin the term "Zeitgeist" has become a new concept alongside the term "culture".

*Yeast* shows Kingsley's yearning for the "zeigeist" in terms of the novel's showing of a disenchanted landscape. The theme "regeneration" signifies the quest for a spiritual homeland. Lancelot, the young protagonist, goes through trials and tribulations in search of a spiritual anchorage in a fragmented world. Historical and literary merits of *Yeast* are illustrated by many critics (Cazamian, 1991: p. 254; Beer, 1965: p. 243-354; Scott, 1983: pp. 195-207; Kijinski, 1985: pp. 97-109; Derbyshire, 2006: pp. 58-64), what remains unsettled is the interrelation between the theme and the imaginative "harmonious Asia" in the novel.

In *Yeast*, the image of the "harmonious Asia" serves as a utopian archetype of the enchanted lands. When the desperate Lancelot encounters the mysterious sage Barnakill, who is supposed to be the Christian socialist leader F. D. Maurice (Hartley, 1977: p. 163), the latter one suggests him to go to Asia, "the oldest and yet the youngest continent ... when you have learnt the wondrous harmony between man and his dwelling place, I will lead you to a land where you shall see the highest spiritual cultivation in triumphant contact with the fiercest energies of matter" (Kingsley, 1851: pp. 253-254).

In his letters and memoirs it is hard to find any direct information of the sources of such utopian imagination. It is also intriguing to notice the displacement between Kingsley's Asian imagination and the historical "facts". In the year 1851 when *Yeast* is finally published, the British empire has just defeated the Qing government in the Opium War. In the national rhetoric of Chinese history, Chinese historians intend to write this period of history as tragic epic. Should Kingsley be so ignorant of the result of the Opium War? Why should Barnakill's words have resonance with ancient Chinese philosophy?

Rana Kabbani has analyzed that in the 19th century Europe,

the Orient has always been an archetype, either of heaven or of hell, yet it seems inadequate when explaining the case here. In the nineteenth century the British Utopian imagination on the Orient has two main sources: 1) Jesus Jesuits and other Catholic missionaries who came to China in late Ming and early Qing. They described China as the land of idyllic beauty ruled by wise kings with their rationalism (the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius) in the works and letters. 2) At the beginning of the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries who came to China also translated and introduced Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and buddhism. Professor James Legge (1839-1873 in China) of the University of Oxford translated *The Four Books (The Great Learning, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Confucian Analects, and The Works of Mencius)* and *The Five Classics (The Book of Songs, The Book of History, The Book of Changes, The Book of Rites and The Spring and Autumn Annals)*, which has a great impact in Britain. Due to the influence of Jesus fellow, a fashion and trend known as Chinoiserie occurred in Europe in late seventeenth century to early nineteenth century, namely that China is an ideal harmonious world with Chinese tea, ceramic, wallpaper, pavilions, pagodas as its symbol. In spite of the Opium War during 1848 to 1851, due to the seclusion, the British did not really enter the Chinese mainland. The truth they knew about China is mainly after the Second Opium War.

Therefore, when Lancelot is enlightened by the sage's "nameless" teaching on Being, he blurts out the Latin words "Solvitur ambulando" (Kingsley, 1851: p. 262). Such philosophically enlightenment could also be found in Confucius words: "Does Heaven speak? The four seasons proceeded by it, the hundreds things are generated by it. Does Heaven speak?" (qtd in Graham, 1989: p. 18); also could be found in the Taoist master Lao Tzu's words: "The way that can be told of is not an unvarying way; the names that can be named are not the unvarying names" (trans Lao, 1997: p. 6). The transformation of Being is achieved by a "Solvitur ambulando" way of transparency of language usage, also declares Zhuangzi, another Taoist in ancient China: "words exist for expressing ideas; once the ideas are expressed, the words are forgotten. I would like to find someone who forgets words and have a talk with him!" (qtd.in Jullien, 2000: p. 307).

The overlapping thoughts either on the revealing of the holy heaven or on the "way" shed light on a dialogical possibility of the meaning travel of *Yeast*. It is worth noting also, Asia is not the only utopia for Kingsley. In *Alton Locke* (1852), the tailor poet is also enlightened through a long conversation with a female sage Eleanor. At the end of the novel, the master sends Locke to Mexico, so as to look for new energy for the rebirth of England. Before setting off, Locke dies in the prime of his life. In 1863, there comes a fairy tale *The Water Babies*, where Kingsley arranges the setting in a fictive watery wonderland, which sets the utopian imagination to another phase.

The diasporic developments and the open endings of Kingsley's novels imply the author's cultural ideal that hasn't been found in his own social landscape. Kingsley could also never have imagined his striving for regeneration would receive regenerative feedbacks hundreds of years later in a nation that he ever imagines as the dreamland. The round trip meaning travel of *Yeast* finds its ambivalent enchantment in its diasporic context. Embedded in the ecological reading space of the novel, the fermentation of the discourse "harmony" incubates the split modern Chinese experience.

## The “Harmony” Disenchanted

For Kingsley the sources of the “harmonious Asia” could be originated from his hermeneutical interpretations on ancient Chinese classics in the context of the Chinoiserie. The Chinese readership of *Yeast* performs productive imitation and distorted parody of Said’s normative travel theory. While Kingsley travels with the ancient Chinese classics by air, the Chinese readers travel with *Yeast* by water. The heterotopian consumptive field of *Yeast* implies ambivalent modern Chinese experiences.

The Chinese readers’ disenchantment of the trope “harmony” metaphorizes the “translated” modern China’s national fable. While the elite community takes pain to create the rhetoric of modern China’s revitalization, the Chinese common readers add a fugue motif in this grand post-post modern symphony. The enchantment of *Yeast* also makes the concept of national identity be more ambiguous: the answer to the question “what China is” depends on how one answers back “what things China don’t have”. The counter discourse of Kingsley’s utopian imagination dwells in the representation that what the “harmonious Asia” is to Kingsley is what *Yeast* is to the Chinese readers<sup>2</sup>.

The astonishing disenchantment of the “harmony” anchors its ethnographic bay shortly after the readers reach the novel’s theme “regeneration”. When discussing Lancelot’s religious rites of passage, many readers blurt that such kind of religious pursuit could seldom be seen in China now:

*Reader 1: The foreigners usually hold religious beliefs, and some of them think that ...*

*Teacher: Let’s discuss it. You don’t think the Chinese hold religious beliefs, right?*

*Reader 1: The Chinese have got very, very superficial comprehension of religion.*

*Teacher: For instance?*

*Reader 2: Recently some people have not held enough beliefs.*

*Reader 1: Their beliefs are mostly superstitious. The foreign religious beliefs require people to do good deeds and to think in some way. Anyway, they work in this way.*

*Reader 3: It is related to their culture.*

*Teacher: Then what we have learnt, take the Confucius thinking which teaches you how to live and behave, for instance. Don’t you think it is ...*

*Reader 1: Um, what I said about religious beliefs is ... (pause) Not mention Confucius. We don’t usually tag Confucius as our religious belief or something we should embrace.*

The transcription implicates the legitimization of the performative nationality in the post-post modern context. From the 19th century’s the Opium War to today’s reform and opening up policy, China has undergone extraordinary vicissitudes in its social structure. The transformation takes the form of emerging fragments of historical discourse that is present and marginalizing, yet is visualized as the discourse of progress and continuity. Modern Chinese discourses, whether of social or scientific practices or on China’s intellectual heritage, are largely articulated in westernized discourses that have been normalized as

<sup>2</sup>See John Macgowan, “Modernity and Culture, the Victorians and Cultural Studies,” in John Kucich and Dianna F. Sadoff, Eds., *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 3-13.

China’s own. Researchers have focused more on the knowledge transfer in the Chinese elite community from whom new terms such as “religion”, “culture”, “superstition”, “western” are introduced and invented, it is equally important to notice that these terms gain their symbolic power through the anonymous travel and circulation in Chinese common mass.

The puzzling acceptance of the borrowed terms could also be seen in the translation practice of the Lancelot’s dogmatic creed before having his regeneration: “a man ought to be religious” (Kingsley, 1851: p. 13). A key factor showing the cultural repurposing is on the diction in the translation of the word “religious”. A lot of the readers use dictions that weaken the Christian orientation in the original text, instead they choose words such as “虔诚”(qiancheng, faithful), “真诚”(zhencheng, sincere), “谨慎”(jinshen, cautious), “有信仰的”(youxinyangde, faithful).

In the reading space of *Yeast*, defining what is valued as “Chinese” in the complexities of the historical Chinese “neighborhood” is challenged. No matter viewed as a verbal object or cognitive mechanism, Lancelot’s regeneration becomes a mediated code from which the Chinese readers imagine their own national identity. A split identity is reified through the discursive formation of a paradoxical othering process:

*Teacher: Why do you think Chinese have a superficial comprehension of religious beliefs?*

*Reader 2: What are the religious beliefs you mentioned?*

*Reader 4: In my opinion, for example, they (the Chinese) don’t attach too much importance to religious beliefs. The old lady with two pistols, for instance. (The old lady with two pistols is a legendary narrative on woman fighting the Japanese soldiers with excellent shooting skill. The image of her is often popularized by the TV operas).*

*Reader 5: Briefly speaking, it is a serious attitude. What we lack is the serious attitude, toward everything.*

*Reader 6: It depends. What you said is too superficial.*

*Reader 5: It is a common phenomenon in China. You cannot find such a thing even in a much poorer country.*

*Teacher: Take for instance, “a man ought to be religious”—How do you think about religious? And what do you mean by “Chinese have a superficial comprehension of religious beliefs?”*

*Reader 7: It is general enough to get religion involved, not individual’s religious problem.*

*Teacher: In what way do you think the Chinese are superficial in religion and the westerners in-depth?*

*Reader 2: Hearing what you said, I think that in each society there are good people and bad people. But I found some people around me, wearing a cross for instance. It only lies in the level of form, and they only wear it for comforting themselves. But strictly speaking, he does not follow all the disciplines nor does he care it deep in the heart. I believe that religious beliefs were transferred to China at a later time.*

*Teacher: So in your opinion, what kind of persons do you think have religious beliefs? In what situation do they get the religious beliefs?*

*Reader 8: I believe Bill Gates is a guy with belief. I think we Chinese rarely do this kind of thing (donation). Take that Wang Shi for instance. He donated very little for the Sichuan earthquake. It is not concerned with the amount*

of money he gave, but something he said at that time. Later he was criticized that he climbed over a mountain. Now he goes to extremes. He is not taller than a grave mound in our hearts.

Reader 2: As to belief, Bill Gates, I respect him very much. His value system must be different from ours. They think the money one earns is given by the society and one is obliged to return some to the society. But we Chinese, I suppose we may become better in the future. I believe that people with beliefs are pious.

Reader 1: He (Bill Gates) has already reached a certain height.

Teacher: What do you think is piety?

Reader 9: In my opinion, piety does not necessarily mean something purely formal. One of my colleagues, I don't mean she is not nice, goes to the temples to burn incenses and make a vow regularly every month. But what she says and does, is not as good as I, who do not believe in Buddhist nor go to temples to burn incenses and make a vow. I don't burn incenses nor make a vow, but I do better things than she does; she burns incenses and makes a vow, but what she has done is unfair. (She is excited). I think Buddha is in one's heart, but not what you do formally.

Teacher: What power or belief do you think makes Bill Gates do so?

Reader 10: This concerns with a person's quality, faith, and his education background. Some people will not be so.

Reader 1: Different people have different views of the world.

The discussion of Lancelot's religious regeneration shows the representation of the self and the otherness. The meaning of "China" and "Lancelot" are depended on the defining, separating, narrating and explaining of the words "China" and "Lancelot". Their discursive relations with other discourses such as Bill Gates' donation and the reader's colleague's fictive worship on Buddhism henceforth remake a fluid Chinese national identity.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China has implemented the policy of reform and opening-up which fosters new cultural orientations<sup>3</sup>. The representation of the nation has shifted from the political slogan of "based on class struggle" to the one of "on socialist economic construction". Hence all arts and humanity activities should serve the people and socialism (Hu Hui-Lin, 1999: p. 113). Yet the dystopian imagination made by the "people" in the "socialist" context explicates the puzzles in the nation's revitalization fable. The astonishing findings on the readers' productive distortions of Lancelot being "富二代" (Fuerdai, Rich2G) imply the agency of the disenchantment of harmony.

<sup>3</sup>The fieldwork was taken in six English classes and one English night club in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province from Jun 2009 to Jun 2012. Since Kingsley claimed that *Yeast* unveiled the "yeasty state of the youth" (266), the Chinese readers were chosen at an age range between 19 and 40. There were 220 readers involved in this research. The participants were invited to express their interpretations on *Yeast* by means of group discussion, insight paper writing, casual interview and passage translation. There was no Chinese version available for *Yeast*, not all of the readers finished reading the novel. The data showed in the body of this paper focused on the participants' interpretations that finished the whole novel. To concentrate on the theme of this essay, interpretations far way relevant to the thesis were excluded.

The regenerative interpretation of *Yeast* is reified through a large scale of attentions paid on Lancelot's aristocrat identity. In the novel one can find few clues to identify Lancelot's family status, one could only get to know that Lancelot's father is a rich merchant, and he later inherits a large amount of legacy from his uncle.

Most of the readers focus on Lancelot's status of being a rich aristocrat. To reterritory Lancelot in the center of their modern experiences, the readers repurpose Lancelot as a good "fuerdai". Fuerdai is a popular term firstly appears in a TV show "Luyu youyue" (《鲁豫有约》), A date with the hostess Luyu in China, identifying the children of the overnight millionaires or of the government officers. The term quickly spreads in China with an ironical rhetoric showing the inequality in China, as well as criticizing the bad manners of these new born Chinese aristocrats and the utilitarian marital ideology elaborated in the industrial process. Many readers also focus on Lancelot's free choice on education, which shows their reluctance to the spoon feeding "quality education" in their own nation. At the same time many of them say the Fuerdais don't have to undertake years of hardworking, their families arrange every thing for them.

In a word, Lancelot becomes a mediated code for the readers to explicate their empirical understandings on their present Beings. The Chinese readership's productive appropriations of Lancelot's regeneration vividly signify the nation's ambivalent relations with the "west". In the representational landscape, the readers' paradoxical national identities are not only showed in their utopian yearning for Lancelot's homeland, but also in their dystopian rejections against the Confucian "tradition". At the same time however, Kingsley's "harmonious Asia" finds its nameless resonance when the readers' unconsciously reveal their "solvitur ambulando" (Kingsley, 1851: p. 262) mode of worldview.

Many of the readers face grammatical and lexical difficulties in the reading process. When they are asked to translate or paraphrase certain fragments of the novel, they directly choose a language that is written as Chinese, but is processed by English way of cognition. Such kind of difficulties show another aspect of what the resistance paradigm of the post-post modern study hasn't paid enough attention to. They also set articulated contrast with the Chinese people's vague yet deeply rooted embodiment of the so called "tradition".

To post modernists the term "tradition" is a new term, to the common Chinese readers "tradition" means the unconscious adoption of the attitude of "solvitur ambulando". Reader 2, a pharmacist, while having great difficulties to understand the novel, sharply realizes the irony hidden behind Lancelot's creeds in the beginning of novel. She says she thinks that Lancelot is forced to ("ought to") have these creeds yet he himself doesn't accept them as the truth at all. Many readers also say that it is unnecessary to "name" or to "presuppose" a lot of things, when you just do whatever you should do and when you feel you do justice to yourselves, then you are regenerated. In this sense, Kingsley's "harmonious Asia" finds fit houses in China.

The meaning travel of *Yeast* in terms of the readers' productive responses to the novel not only challenges the conventional paradigm of literary study, but also shows a fugue motif in China's revitalizing fable. The Asian imagination finds its new meanings in the process of critical readings on *Yeast*.

## Conclusion

The diasporic reading practice of *Yeast* focuses on the non-elite Chinese readers' heterogeneous performativity of national identity in the globalized context. The Chinese responses shows its powerful initiative in the legitimization of the western values, which adds a fugue motif in the idiosyncratic Chinese national fable in the globalizing phase. Academically such kind of research adventure gives an alternative perspective to see the issue of the governance versus resistance paradigm; moreover, it gives further trajectory to the Said's travel theory. To common Chinese readers having the tickets of *Yeast* meaning travel invite them to understand themselves more in the center of Chinese experiences. One reader appropriates Lancelot's ironical tone towards the religious creeds in this way: "such kinds of creeds are so similar to what we are asked to remember through rote memorization: you ought to love your country, you ought to love your people. The truth is, sometimes we don't know who the people are and where the country is". Another one says "Buda is nameless, you know, 'solvitur ambulando', Buda lives in your heart".

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