

Chapter Three

Totality in Orientalism

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan recounts her story through the deployment of two intertwined narratives and situates her characters in the contemporary American society, where the long-brewed multicultural ethics is rising up against hundreds of years of domination by Orientalism, and in the nineteenth-century China, where western empires had rushed to pursue their imperial interests. In order to investigate these background influences upon the characters, I intend to utilize Edward W. Said's discussion of Orientalism and the connection between western culture and its imperial enterprises as my theoretical framework. These two themes are related; Orientalism in a broad sense includes and serves as the theoretical basis for imperialism and the functioning of western empires, while imperialism is a more limited term concerning the historical experiences of the exploitation and oppression of the non-western areas and their peoples since the massive expansion of western empires in the nineteenth century. Briefly speaking, Orientalism exists at a more theoretical level, and imperialism is a more historical term. Because of this distinction, I intend to apply Said's theory about Orientalism chiefly to Olivia's narrative of twentieth-century American and Chinese societies, and utilize the observations in *Cultural and Imperialism* mainly in Kwan's narrative about nineteenth-century China. In doing so, I find myself obliged to make clear some presupposition in my discussion first. Although Olivia and Kwan share the father, they in fact have different cultural identities that serve the foundation for the whole story. I mean to view Olivia, the main narrator in the novel, as a representative of western /Euro-American culture who sees Kwan as the embodiment of a foreign culture. The distinction of their cultural background is evident in Olivia's introduction to their relationship: "She [Kwan] was

born in China. My brothers, Kevin and Tommy, and I were born in San Francisco after my father, Jack Yee, immigrated *here* and married our mother, Louise Kenfield”(3 italic mine). The mere geographical consciousness of “here” provides Olivia a solid basis for consciousness of her cultural identity as an American to separate her from her half-sister Kwan, who belonged to somewhere *out there* (in opposition to “here”) before she came “here.”

I. Orientalism

To begin with, a brief introduction to Orientalism is necessary. Said thinks that the history of Orientalism can be roughly traced back to classic Greek era when Plato made the distinction between the civilized Greeks and the “barbarians.” This idea of the uncivilized “barbarians” had long proved to be a useful and powerful tool for the western culture to establish its identity as a whole. When the Europeans set out to explore the world after the Enlightenment and encountered various cultural forms in the East, a modern concept of Orientalism gradually took shape. As Said puts it, in Orientalism the Orient is “*almost a European invention*, and had been since antiquity a place of *romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences*”(emphases mine O 1). The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe in geography, but “the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.” The most important function that the Orient has had for the Western world is to help “define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience”(O 1 emphases mine). In order to have a better picture of how it functions, Said suggests that Orientalism must be seen as “a mode of discourse”(O 2). That is, Orientalism has particular rules to regulate its discursive formation; everything one says or writes about the Orient has to conform to

certain rules or presuppositions within that discursive domain, so that the statement can gain its legitimacy and authenticity. In addition to reflecting the Westerners' irrational bias against the non-West world for the last hundreds of years, the Orientalist discourse has also permeated into the academic circle at least since the massive western imperial expansion in the nineteenth century, and helped to establish some modern disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, and Regional Studies, which, under the halo of scientific objectivity, have successfully transformed those ethnic and cultural discriminations into "objective truths."

One of the reasons why Said criticizes Orientalism fervently is its nature as a "representation." By this he does not mean that Orientalism is a false representation of the true Orient or that there is a faithful representation of it. Basically, Said does not believe in such a thing as "a real or true Orient;" nor in "the necessary privilege of an 'insider' perspective over an 'outsider' one." The point is that the Orient is itself a "constituted entity." The notion that "there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space" is a highly debatable idea (*O* 322). We only have to look back at the very language we use to understand what this means. The language system we use to signify things is actually an enclosed system that has meanings within its own context; the words are supposed to *refer to* actual things, but they *are not* things themselves after all. That is why Said comments that in language there is "no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation" (*O* 21 italic in original).

In this particular representational system of Orientalist discourse, a statement is a presence by virtue of its having excluded and displaced such a real thing as the Orient. Orientalism, as Said points out, "stands *forth* and *away* from the Orient"—its making sense at all depends "more on the West than on the Orient" (*O* 22 emphases mine).

After all, the speaking subject behind the discourse of Orientalism *is* the Westerner, not the Oriental. Instead of paying attention to *what* they represent and the extent of their correctness, Said suggests that the things to look at in the Orientalist representations are “style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances”(O 21). In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Tan presents two interesting kinds of representation that are used for the Orientalist purpose—photography and narrative. In the following passages, I will use photography as an example to illustrate how it can be used for the Orientalist purpose. As for narrative, because of its affinity to imperialism, it will be discussed later.

Photography is generally regarded as a neutral representation of reality, however, according to Linda Hutcheon, it actually reflects “the discursive and aesthetic assumption of the camera-holder”(Hutcheon 7). Susan Sontag expresses the similar viewpoint, as we can see in the preface to her *On Photography*, in which she explains her motive to write that book: “It all started with one essay—about some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images; but the more I thought about what photographs are, the more complex and suggestive they became”(Preface to *Photography*).³⁵ As Sontag points out, photographs are not just simple reflections or representations of the objective reality and human experiences, but an “interpretation”(Photography 7) of reality because they “add vast amounts of material that we never see at all”(Photography 156). That “vast amounts of material” are what makes a photograph different from a real object or experience, and they can be anything that can achieve the effect the photographer wants on his/her readers, such as the Orientalist discourse. As Sontag notes, the historical fact that “the 1850s was the great age of *photographic Orientalism*”(emphases mine *Photography*

³⁵ In the parenthetical documentation hereafter, *Photography* stands for Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Books, 1977.

89) precisely indicates the possibility for photography to meet certain intentions. In the novel, Olivia also detects the difference between reality and its image. As Olivia says, “[T]he way we see our reflections from changing angles allows us to edit out what we don’t like. The camera is a different sort of eye”(274). In brief, the invention of camera has changed the way we see the world; as Sontag observes, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an *ethics of seeing*”(emphases mine *Photography* 3).

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia wears a pair of Orientalist glasses to see China, as she admits when she sees Changmian for the first time:

As I look *through* the viewfinder, I feel as though we’ve stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion. Are we in Chinese Nirvana? Changmian *looks like* the carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures advertising ‘a charmed world of the distant past, where visitors can step back in time.’ It conveys all the sentimental quaintness that tourists crave but never actually see. (emphases mine 229-30)

As I mentioned before, Said thinks that the Western Orientalist imagination swings between two extremes—the barbaric and the exotic; apparently Olivia’s fantasy about China falls into the latter. This exotic kind of Orientalism represents the Orient as a changeless ancient world, undisturbed by modernization. The rural landscape of Changmian unfortunately falls prey to the invented past of Orientalist fantasy. As Olivia’s fancy of Changmian as a Chinese fantasyland for tourists informs, “See the China of your dreams! Unspoiled by progress, mired in the past!”(230) And besides showing Olivia’s Orientalist tendency, the long passage above also reveals another interesting thing: Olivia compares a living reality to the images in travel brochures. By this comparison Olivia seems to tell us that the photos presented in travel

brochures can satisfy the Orientalist illusions of their Western readers. And from her words one can see a secret connection among Orientalism, photographs and tourism. In fact, as Said asserts, the rise of Orientalism has to do with the Westerners' travel experiences in the Orient. Also Sontag points out that photography has a close relationship with the activity of modern tourism. In the following passage I will talk about the relation between photography and tourism.

According to Sontag, photography provides people with a “defense against anxiety” (*Photography* 8) when they travel. As she puts it, photographs help people “take possession of space in which they are insecure”(9). Due to industrialization and modernization, for the first time in history, large numbers of people regularly travel out of their habitual environments for a short period of time. Now it would seem unnatural for people to travel for pleasure without taking a camera along because photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made and that fun was had. But in spite of serving as a way of certifying experience, taking photographs becomes also a way of denying it. Through photographs people limit their experiences into a search of the photogenic and convert them into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a “strategy for accumulating photographs”(*Photography* 9). The very activity of taking pictures is soothing; it assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience of tourism: “stop, take a photograph, and move on” (*Photography* 10).

In addition to serving as a defense against anxiety, photography is also a means of appropriation and control. People are used to considering photographers as ideal observers and taking photographs as a harmless act, but actually that is not the case. According to Sontag, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It

means putting oneself into a certain relations to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power” (*Photography* 4). In fact, photography is itself a “tool of power” (*Photography* 8). As the gun is often compared to the symbol of power—the phallus—so is the camera. There is an analogy in the verbs we use to describe the camera and the gun: to “load” and “aim” a camera, and to “shoot” a film. Like the gun, the camera is highly aggressive in nature. To photograph people is to “violate” them, to see them as they never see themselves, and to have knowledge of them they can never have. In a word, photography turns people and reality into “objects that can be symbolically possessed” (*Photography* 14). Sontag even uses the adjective “imperious” to suggest photography’s affinity to imperialism.

In one sense, Olivia’s taking photographs represents not only a defense against her anxiety caused by the cultural shock but also her desire to control/possess an alien reality. The experiences in China give Olivia a deep sense of disorientation. As she complains, “[I]n China, where I have no control, where everything is unpredictable, totally insane”(292). Under this kind of circumstance, she needs something that can soothe her anxiety and make her feel that she can control the foreign environment, so she resorts to her camera. Through her viewfinder, she feels empowered and at home again because she can choose her materials and tame them into the type of images she wants. When Olivia spots the bird market in Guilin, she describes it as that “part of town that screams with photo opportunities”(214). To Olivia, this is a good opportunity both to photograph and to feel herself under control again. As a tourist/journalist in China, Olivia is particularly sensitive to the unusual, exotic, or weird things, which are photogenic to her travel magazine because they meet her exotic imagination and will also impress her magazine readers. As Olivia thinks to herself: “A picture of them, set against a background of beautiful and better-fated birds, might make a nice visual *for* the magazine article”(emphasis mine 214).

Taking photographs is not an objective observation, nor does it leave its subjects untouched; this is especially true about professional photography. As a matter of fact, photography is a medium for interpreting reality, and therefore it can alter the state of things. The photographer alters the state of things in two ways: First, the photographed subject's awareness of the presence of the photographer would change the way the subject behaves. As Sontag points asserts, there is "something on people's faces when they don't know they are being observed that never appears when they do" (*Photography* 37). In the novel, when Du Li-li knows that Olivia is taking a picture of her, she acts unnaturally: "Upon seeing my camera, she jumps up to *pose* and tugs at the bottom of her old green jacket"(emphasis mine 294). Second, through the viewfinder, the photographer represents the subject not in the way that the subject is seen through the naked eye, because the photographer has to process his/her subject by using lots of photographing techniques: such as zooming, editing, adjusting the focus, retouching, and etc. As Sontag notes, "[A] photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it" (*Photography* 155). And by altering the way objective reality appears, the photographer can also affect how readers interpret his/her photographs. We think that images (or photographs) possess the qualities of real things, but as Sontag claims, it is our inclination to "attribute to real things the qualities of an image" (*Photography* 158).

In capitalist market economy, however, this relationship between photographers and readers is not unilateral but mutual. That is, readers' expectation of the kind of the photographs they want can also influence the way the photographer presents photographs. In the novel, Olivia is aware of the influence of the Orientalist expectation of her Western readers on her when she takes photographs of Changmian for the travel magazine, and she expresses her loath for taking photographs for

particular purpose. As Olivia states her struggle within:

I should be “PRE-VISUALIZING” the moment I want [...]. But all I see in my head are well-heeled readers flipping through a chic travel magazine that SPECIALIZES IN BUCOLIC IAMGES OF THE THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES. I know what people want to see. That’s why my work feels unsatisfactory, PRE-EDITED into safe dullness. It isn’t that I want to take photos that are deliberately unflattering. What’s the point in that? There is no market for them, and even if there were, hard realism would give people the wrong impression that *all* of China is this way, backward, unsanitary, miserably poor. I hate myself for being American enough to make these judgments. (capitals mine 293)

As the passage shows, Olivia cares not only about the market value of her photos, but about what partial impression they might cause to her Western readers. Taking photographs is not about pushing the shutter button at random; it involves careful *selection* of the materials, the *angle* of shooting, the light and shade, the color and the focus that photographers want to present in their photos. By their characteristic of freezing a moment into eternity (more or less, as long as the picture exists), photos tend to give people the impression that they can catch some mysterious essence of their subjects in an instant. That is, photos (or photography in general) tend to *essentialize* objective reality. If we also take into consideration Said’s observation that Orientalism tends to over-generalize the features of an individual case into the ethnic features of a whole race, then it is not difficult to understand why Olivia worries that her photos might give the wrong impression that all of China is backward, unsanitary and poor.

The last sentence of the previous quotation is intensely interesting; it suggests that Olivia’s self-reflection upon her potential Orientalist presumptions is aroused by

her close contact with the subjects of her photos; in other words, through their contact, Olivia has established a genuine relationship with the villagers and learns to know more about the real life in Changmian and its people. The more she knows them, the more her concrete experiences would replace her previous abstract idea about Changmian people. That is why Levinas keeps emphasizing on the importance of the “face-to-face” relationship, because he knows that it is perhaps the simplest but also the most effective way to shake off our prejudice against each other.

Now let us go back to the discussion of Orientalism itself. In the opening of his discussion, Said describes Orientalism as a “system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness”(O 6). That is, Orientalism is a form of discourse appearing to be objective knowledge through institutionalization. Pure Knowledge is traditionally viewed as neutral, carrying no weight of ideologies or values, and is different from the lower-ranked political knowledge. But Said questions the validity of this distinction. He believes that the general liberal consensus that pure knowledge is nonpolitical obscures “the highly if obscurely organized *political circumstances* obtaining when knowledge is produced”(O 10 emphasizes mine). Olivia’s photographic representation can illustrate this point. In order to provide information that has marketing value to her readers in America, Olivia has to “pre-visualize” and “edit” the materials she wants to present. These acts show that Olivia is aware of the political (and commercial) value of her information. Here the suggestion of the close relation between knowledge and power (since politics is all about power struggles) reminds us of Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge structure, upon which Said professes to rely for his methodology.

This highly political knowledge of western Orientalism has several features. Firstly, it is *totalizing* and *abstracting*. Orientalism tends to grab the Orient and the Orientals as a homogeneous entity, disregarding the complex differences of their races,

cultures, customs, religions, etc., and reduce them to some abstract adjective such as exotic, barbaric, ancient and backward. In Kwan's narrative about the nineteenth-century Changmian, when Pastor Amen knew that death was upon him, he shouted hysterically: "I hate China! I hate Chinese people! I hate *their* crooked eyes, *their* crooked hearts. *They* have no souls to save"(emphases mine 204). Perhaps this irrational curse can best exemplify the pastor's deep-rooted racist bias. Secondly, it is "essential." Said indicates that in Orientalism the Orientals have "a *Platonic essence*, which any Orientalist (or ruler of Orientals) might examine, understand, and expose"(O 38 emphases mine). That is, despite their cultural dynamics and historical changes, the Orientals are presumed to possess an unchanging core, which identifies them as "Oriental." It is due to this convenient constructed essence that the Orientals were, are, and will always be obviously "Oriental" in Orientalist discourse. Thirdly, it accords unequal status to the Orient and the Occident. In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the "flexible *positional* superiority," which puts the Westerner in all possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand (O 7 emphases in original). Within the knowledge structure of Orientalism, the West puts itself in the sovereign position of the active knowing subject, while the Orient is located in the subaltern place of the passive known object. Based upon this positional inequality, the West has endowed itself with the unchallengeable power to observe, study, and write—in brief, to do whatever it wants to the Orient, and the Orient can only lie there, waiting to be analyzed, anatomized and written about by its superior contestant. As Said notices, to have such knowledge of such a thing is to "dominate it, to have authority over it," and authority here means "for 'us' [Westerners] to deny autonomy to 'it'—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as we know it*"(italic in original, O 32).

The aforementioned characteristics can be illustrated by the journal inside the wooden music box that Kwan unearths. The journal is called *A Visit to India, China, and Japan*, and kept by some Westerner named Bayard Taylor. Though it is only a private journal, the keeper does not see any inappropriateness in making the moral and pseudo-anthropological observation of the Orientals. Among the pages one phrase is underlined: “*Their crooked eyes are typical of their crooked moral vision*”(emphases mine 354). Although it is not known to which country the phrase refers, at least it represents the negative image of the Orient conceived by the Westerner. The tone of this description is obviously totalizing and essentialist as the words “are” and “typical” indicate. The possessive case “their” implies that the Orientals are the observed objects, and that out there is a hidden but sovereign “I” who can make an assertion as a knowing subject.

Despite the scientific and objective disguise that is put on Orientalism, one can still discover the truth that the fundamental idea lying beneath the whole structure of Orientalism is what Anwar Abdel Malek terms as “Europocentrism.”³⁶ This “Europocentrism” views not only everything by the standard of the European values but also the Europeans as the *only* qualified mankind in the world. Like Said, Malek is convinced that the Orient in the Orientalism is an “essentialist” and “constitutive otherness” and that this essentialist conception of the Oriental leads to racism (O 97). To Malek, this “Europocentrism” is at the heart of the so-called “anthropocentrism” advocated by Europeans. Aunt Betty’s racist view about the Chinese is representative of this ethnocentric mentality. As she tells little Olivia, “Your dad was good-looking, *for a Chinese man*. He was college-educated. And he spoke English like me and your mom. Now *why* would he marry a little peasant girl?”(emphases mine 6). It seems

³⁶ Malek’s argument here is cited from Said’s discussion in *Orientalism*, p. 97-8. Notice that this “Europocentrism” covers the twentieth-century America in a broad sense.

“natural” to Aunt Betty that only a good-looking and well educated Chinese male can *match* an American “Kelly girl.” What those words try to express is the groundless Europocentric viewpoint that the Caucasian are better than the Chinese, and that English is a superior language to Chinese.

In addition to depending on this Europocentrism to serve as the groundwork of its structure, Orientalism also relies its framework on the logic of “Manichean binary opposition”(CI 110)—the Self vs. the Other, the Westerner vs. the Oriental, and etc. As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia point out, the designation of the term “Oriental” already implies “a range of knowledge and an intellectual mastery over that which is named.”³⁷ This logic, rather than presenting the opposition of two equal parts, functions by relying upon some predetermined but arbitrary idea or value—in the case of Orientalism, it is Europocentrism—to serve as the measuring norm. That is, this logic of dichotomy functions by observing the *principle of negation* to build up a series of opposite values that form the value system of Orientalism. To the I, the Other is not seen as the Other at first, but as the opposite of the I, the “non-I.” This negative distinction is used not only for identification of the Western Self but also in its geographical consciousness. When the Europe began to view itself as the “West,” it then began to treat the Orient as the “East,” which actually meant “non-West,” and then it triggered the endless process of attaching labels of meanings and features to itself and its imaginary opponent. Since Europeans considered themselves as “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal,’” it was convenient and natural for them to regard the Oriental as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’”(O 40). What gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather “the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the

³⁷ Ashcroft, Bill and Pal Ahluwalia. *Edward Said: The Paradoxes of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1999. p.57

Orient was identified *by the West*”(O 40 italic mine).

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, for instance, Aunt Betty shows this negatively reductionist view of the Oriental when she tries to dissuade Louise from receiving Kwan from China: ”How can you [Louise] take in a nearly grown girl who can’t speak a word of English? She *won’t know* right from wrong or left from right”(9 emphases mine). Aunt Betty has this preconceived binary division in her mind, regarding the Oriental as the opposite in every way to the Westerner. By utilizing this logic of binary opposition, Aunt Betty can easily make a judgment about what an Oriental girl *should be*. To Said, such practice of designing in one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a way of “making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary.” This practice is arbitrary because the imaginatively geographical distinction of “our land—barbarian land” never requires the acknowledgment of the barbarians (O 54). In short, it is this negative identification of the Western self that builds up the violent tradition of Orientalism.

Not content with merely criticizing the discursive violence of Western Orientalism, Said goes further to search for the possible explanation for the need of such dehumanizing knowledge. He resorts to Levi-Strauss’s hypothetical theory about the “science of the concrete,” which argues that the human mind requires order to feel secure. In order to establish that order, the mind has to discriminate and take note of everything around it, then tries to put everything in a secure and refindable place, and finally assigns some role to things to play in the economy of objects and identities that make up an environment (O 53). As Said observes, this kind of rudimentary classification has its own logic, but the rules of this logic are “neither predictably rational nor universal;” after all, the distinction of values is always “arbitrary”(O 54). To answer to this phenomenon of arbitrary distinction of values, Said finds assistance

in Gramsci's concept of "hegemony." The idea is that, in any society not totalitarian, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is "hegemony" (O 7). The hegemonic concepts become the mainstream values of a culture, promoting themselves to be the "norm" to measure other values, deciding, for instance, what is "moral" or what is "beautiful." Viewed from this perspective, culture, like discourse, is not only oppressive, but also highly "productive" (O 14). It forms and disseminates values within society to enforce people to accept it, consciously or not. It is hegemony or the result of cultural hegemony that gives Orientalism its durability and strength.

As mentioned above, the human mind needs classification to establish an order. Said finds this technique of classification particularly worth exploring. He argues that when the mind suddenly confronts a radical new form of life or culture, its response is generally "conservative and defensive." In order to lower its anxiety, it has to resort to a "new median category," a category that allows one to see new things as "versions of a previously known thing" (O 59). So to the West the Orient is always *like* some aspect of the West. For example, when Olivia recalls their family's reception of Kwan in her childhood, she uses a westernized phrase to describe Kwan—"Chinese Cinderella" (7). In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a "method of *controlling* what seems to be a threat to some established view of things" (O 59 *italic mine*). In other words, the mind has to *familiarize* the alien elements to maintain its sense of security. Said terms this condition as "domestication of the exotic," which is natural between all cultures. The result of this transformation is that those foreign cultures are received not as they are, but as "they *ought* to be" (O 67 *italic mine*). Said finds this mental operation by the Orientalists to be particularly reprehensible because not only of their "limited vocabulary and imagery that impose themselves as a consequence" (O 60) but also of the undeniable fact that in the

Orient-West relation, the West is “always in a position of strength, not to say domination,” and their relationship is “between a strong and a weak partner”(O 39-40).

Unlike Foucault, who thinks that in general the individual text or author does not weigh much in a discourse, Said believes in “the determining imprint of individual writers” upon the collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism because he regards Orientalism as “a system for citing works and authors” (O 23). In Orientalist discourse certain authors and their works are frequently cited as “authority” to convince the readers of the authenticity and legitimacy of the proposed arguments. In the novel, when Olivia and Simon watch Du Li-li stirring the chicken blood in the stew, they immediately think of the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. As Olivia recites, “For a charm of powerful trouble, like a hell-broth boil and bubble”(297). Because they have never had such experience before, it is natural for them resort to their previous reading about similar situations to describe their feeling.

In doing that, however, Olivia and Simon cause two consequences. Firstly, they have already conditioned what they really feel by the cited text; instead of expressing clearly their feeling, they only add more charm to the thing they are not familiar with. This unfamiliar thing only gets more mysterious and more negative. Secondly, by this citation they also enhance the authority of the referred text in return. In other words, there is a *dialectic of reinforcement* between the cited text and the citing one. On the one hand, the cited text gives a credit to the one citing it; on the other hand, the citing one pays tribute to the authority to enhance its unchallengeable status as speaker of truth. The two parties actually form a *structure of accomplices*. As Said puts it, this authority in citation is “*formed*” and “*disseminated*”(italic mine); its purpose is “persuasive;” it has status and “establishes canons of taste and value;” but what is

more important is that it is “indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true” and the “traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces”(O 19-20). The more the cited text is referred to, the more authoritative it becomes, and the more “self-evident” its argument will appear. Said terms this way of understanding complex human experience by what a text says as “textual attitude”(O 92). This reductionist attitude *creates* not only knowledge but also the very reality it appears to describe. Gradually such knowledge and reality produces a tradition or what Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight is responsible for the texts produced out of it.

This system of citing a limited number of authorities in a closed circle in Orientalism helps create the stereotypes of the Orient and the Orientals. In contemporary society where public media holds sway, there has been “a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed.” Television, films, and all the media have forced information into more and more standardized patterns. So far as the Orient is concerned, *standardization* and *cultural stereotyping* have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative fiction of ‘the mysterious Orient’”(O 26).

For instance, in the beginning of the novel, Olivia’s mother, Louise, is introduced as an Caucasian woman who, when she was young, once dreamed to be “*thin, exotic, and noble* like Louise Rainer, who won an Oscar playing O-lan in *The Good Earth*”(emphases mine 3). Obviously Louise’s conception of the Oriental girl derives from the romanticized image represented by the Hollywood film, which presents before the white audience an Oriental girl in a far and unfamiliar milieu (hence “exotic”), who has undergone innumerable sufferings and poverty (hence “thin” and “noble”). Louise equates this representational image with the reality without feeling any inappropriateness. She is so obsessed with those Orientalist representations that

when she becomes a “Kelly girl” instead, she compensates her youthful disillusionment by seeking ethnic males, because she thinks that “a colony under foreign dictatorship is excellent” and that “men who have suffered from oppression and a black-market economy know there’s more at stake. They try harder to win you over”(61). But what Louise does not think of is that it is western empires that have caused the pains and sufferings of those third world countries since the nineteenth century. It is ironic but also annoying to see how Westerners colonized and exploited non-westerners at first, and then rationalized their behavior either by dehumanizing the non-westerners or by romanticizing them as noble people because they think sufferings make people noble. Anyway, it is this tragic image that always arouses Louise’s “condescending” love for third-world males. It also explains why she thinks that her marriage out of the Anglo race—first to Olivia’s father, then to Bob Laguni—makes her a “liberal”(4). The self-appreciative term only boosts the ideology of white superiority rather than shows Louise’s genuine respect for the ethnic people. What is more ironic is that, as Olivia informs us, the laws against mixed marriage “did not apply in California.” This fact somehow intensifies the imaginary proportion of Louise’s love for Olivia’s father. In short, in Louise’s romanticizing fantasy she has objectified ethnic people as “exotic,” ready to be consumed or appropriated by the egoistic Western Self she represents.

II. Culture and Imperialism

Conventionally culture is considered as politically innocent; we tend to treat it as a secluded utopia away from the secular disputes in daily life. But Said thinks it otherwise; he argues that society and culture can only be understood and studied together (O 27). In his research of Orientalism and imperialism, he finds that culture plays a key role in preserving and disseminating them. Basically Said defines culture

broadly as various “practices” that have relative autonomy from economic, social and political realms and that often exist in “aesthetic forms” such as “arts of description, communication, and representation”(CI xii). From this perspective literary texts can be seen as “notations and cultural practices” (CI 259).

In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Kwan’s narrative about her previous life as Nunumu in Changmian in the mid-nineteenth century provides abundant background information concerning the influence of imperialism on the characters. Before beginning to investigate the dimensions of imperialism in the novel, I need to explain the connection between west empires and imperialism first. As Michael Doyle puts it,

Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.³⁸

In other words, the chief concern for the empire is the maximum interest for itself, and imperialism is its means to gain it. In Tan’s novel, this interest-only orientation is evident on the foreign mercenaries in China. Two of Miss Banner’s three men in China made their fortune by putting the Chinese in misery. Miss Banner used to live with an English captain, who helped the Manchus fight the Taipings and “earned big money for each city he captured,” and later with General Cape, a Yankee, who helped Taipings at first to fight against the Manchus, and also gathered money “by looting the cities he and the God Worshippers burned to the ground”(53). Later on, General Cape betrayed the God Worshippers to join the Manchus. One can see from the domestic war in China that those western empires did not care about who won the war at all as long as they could earn the biggest interest for themselves.

³⁸ Doyle, Michael W. *Empires*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986. p. 45.

In order to pursue their ultimate profits, western empires began to expand their territories to gain more natural resources and mass labors. Hence they developed complex colonialism to achieve their aims. But sometimes they would also acquire what they wanted through other means such as signing unequal treaties with third world countries. Basically the relationship between western empires and China fell into the latter pattern. China, like India, North Africa, and many other former colonies of European empires, was a “site of contention well before 1870, either between various local resistance groups, or between the European powers themselves” (*CI* 221). The fact of the very presence of those foreign missionaries and soldiers like General Cape in China is an evidence showing that the power of western empires had intruded into China since the mid-nineteenth century. The influence of the empire cannot be underestimated, even though it may not appear in the story. As Said observes, “As a reference, as a point of definition, as an easily assumed place of travel, wealth, and service, the empire functions for much of the European nineteenth century as a codified, if only marginally visible, presence in fiction” (*CI* 63). Take the British Empire for example. As V. G. Kiernan notes, the British Empire at least opened wars with China in opium wars (1839-42) and in second China war (1856-60).³⁹ The motive for launching attacks against China was all for the imperial profits because the Chinese government banned the import of opium and restricted the activity area for foreigners. With its overwhelming armed forces, the British Empire forced China to sign unequal treaties with it. That was why Pastor Amen and his English missionaries could travel to Changmian and preach there freely. In the novel, the foreign missionaries except Miss Banner were all from England (43). This shows how powerful the British Empire was in the nineteenth century when the English were

³⁹ Kiernan, V.G. “Tennyson, King Arthur and Imperialism.” *Poets, Politics, and the People*. Ed. Harvey J. Kaye. London: Verso, 1989. p.134.

proud to say that the sun never set in their territories.

The intrusion of the western empires into China in the nineteenth century was pointed out directly by the unequal treaty between the Qing authority and western empires. As Nunumu said, “a new treaty *came out* saying the foreigners could live anywhere in China *they pleased*”(emphases mine 43). The tone of “came out” seems to suggest that the treaty was based on mutual consent and interests between the China and the western empires, but it was not so. The fact that the foreigners could live anywhere in China as “they pleased” implies that the western empires were on the advantageous side. In fact, during the nineteenth century China was forced to sign many unequal treaties with the western empires by their guns and cannons, including treaties that demanded China to relinquish some of its territories, such as Hong Kong and Macao, to them, treaties that admitted foreigners from these western empires to live, travel, do business and preach wherever they liked in China, and treaties that allowed the westerners to import opium to China. The profession of Miss Banner’s father demonstrated how the western imperialists made their profits by poisoning the Chinese. As Nunumu informed us, Miss Banner’s father worked for a Russian shipping company that “bought opium in India [...] then sold it in China, spreading a dreaming sickness among Chinese people”(52). Also Yiban’s father once took up the opium trade (164). After Nunumu and Miss Banner became close friends, Nunumu once complained to her that how the mixture of “foreigners and opium make trouble”(54).

Western empires invaded the non-western world and maintained their control not only through their military and political forces but also through seemingly harmless channels such as education or preaching. Few people paid attention to the relationship between the mission of Christianity and western imperialism because the former was generally conducted hand in hand with charities. I do not intend to deny the good will

in charities of the church, but only want to point out why, as Said inquires, “humanistic ideas coexisted so comfortably with imperialism” (CI 82). The reason for this coexistence in Western Christian culture may be its deep-rooted idea of Manichean binary oppositions (CI 110), as Said suggests, “Perhaps the custom of distinguishing ‘our’ home and order from ‘theirs’ grew into harsh political rule for accumulating more of ‘them’ to rule, study, and subordinate” (82). The central idea of this ethnic binary opposition is Eurocentrism. According to Said, this Eurocentrism subordinated non-westerners by “banishing their identities, except as a lower order of being, from the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe”(CI 222). Through such seemingly harmless humanistic enterprise as mission, west empires could instill the idea of white superiority more easily into the third-world people. As J.A. Hobson notes, the selfish forces which direct imperialism “utilize the protective colours of [...] disinterested movements”⁴⁰ such as philanthropy, religion, science and art. And the excuse the imperialists used to justify their imperialist and colonialist behaviors was that they bore the “civilizing mission” (CI 131) for the whole world. Therefore western empires must first conquer the whole world to facilitate their humanistic enterprise of “westernizing the backward”(CI 131).

Viewed from this perspective, it is not difficult to understand the significance of the task of Pastor Amen and his fellow missionaries in Changmian. Pastor Amen tried to persuade the Changmian people (and the Chinese at large) that they must be converted into Christians to win their *salvation*. Once the Chinese accepted Christianity, it would be easier for westerners to convince them of white supremacy and the *necessity* of imperialism. That is why Pastor was so concerned with how many people he converted, and why he cursed the Chinese when he became desperate: “I hate China! I hate Chinese people! I hate their crooked eyes, their crooked hearts.

⁴⁰ Hobson, J.A. *Imperialism: A Study*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1972. p. 197.

They have no souls to save”(204). The Chinese (and all non-westerners and non-Christians) had no soul to save because the Europeans regarded them as sub-human. As an outstanding European intellectual, Sartre also criticizes this dehumanizing tendency in western cultures relentlessly: “There is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism, since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.”⁴¹

The inequality between westerners and non-westerners was so prevalent that it even devastated intimacy between friends and blood relationship. Miss Banner asked Nunumu to be her “companion”(43) after Nunumu saved her life, and they soon became bosom friends. With their friendship growing, however, one can still distinguish an undercurrent of master and servant relationship behind their friendship. This inequality was not so obvious when they were close, but once they fought over General Cape’s character, it rose up to the surface. After their argument, Miss Banner treated Nunumu “as if I [Nunumu] were her servant”(162). This obscure fact indicates a preconceived inequality between a westerner and a native Oriental at that time. Also, General Cape called his translator, Johnson, “*Yiban ren*, the one-half man”(36), because Johnson had an American father *but* a Chinese mother. Even Yiban’s father never treated him like his own son; in fact, his father considered him more like a *dehumanized object* that could be used as a display in circus, and as the security for the debt his father owed to General Cape. As Nunumu recounted, since the day Yiban’s father left him, he “*belonged to General Cape*”(emphases mine 165). In the novel, this ethnic inequality was sometimes delicately disguised as a class distinction in their arrangement of seats in the dining room—the Chinese servants sat at one table while the foreign missionaries sat at another. As for the interracial Yiban, the

⁴¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Preface” to Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farmington. New York: Grove, 1968. p. 26.

foreigners decided he was “more Chinese than Johnson”(163), so he had to sit with the Chinese servants, not with the foreigners. All these phenomena testify Said’s observation that in the relationship between the west and the third world, the former was (and still is) in a position of strength.

The influence of imperialism and the empire cannot only be seen in the relations among characters, but also in the formal design of narrative. The narrative form I refer to here belongs to the tradition of modern realist fiction in the west since the eighteenth century. In fact, there seems to be a strong connection between modern fiction and imperialism. As Said notes, the prototype of modern realistic novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, is about “a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island”(CI xii). The emergence of modern fiction had to do with the appearance of the new bourgeois class in the west, whose prosperity happened to depend upon the expansion of western empires. According to Said, “Novel, as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism are unthinkable without each other” (CI 71). That is why most of the heroes and heroines in modern fiction are bourgeois, including Olivia and Simon in *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

In cultural exchanges all cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures to master or in some way control them, yet not all cultures make representations of foreign cultures *and* in fact master or control them. Because of the unequal relationship between the west and the non-west world, the power to represent foreign cultures has been the privilege of modern Western cultures. As Said asserts, representation “has been characterized as keeping the subordinate subordinate, the inferior inferior”(CI 80). And narrative, whose teleology is “associated with the global role of the West,” is “the representation of power”(CI 273). In order to understand better the message of a narrative, one must “connect the structures of narrative to the ideas, concepts, experiences from which it draws support” (CI 67). For instance, that

Olivia, not Kwan, is the chief narrator in the novel is an important clue to interpret the significance of the whole novel. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I tend to view Olivia and Kwan belonging to different cultural environments. Despite the formal juxtaposition of Olivia's and Kwan's narratives, the whole story is narrated from the first-person perspective of Olivia. In other words, Olivia is the heroine of the novel who really possesses the power to represent, and Kwan is at best the supporting heroine in the whole fictional framework.

As Said observes, this power of representation in the narrative derives from the novel's "consolidation of authority"(CI 77). The function of authority is "instrumental" and "persuasive" because it establishes "canons of taste and value" (O 19-20). In the course of narrative, there are three kinds of authority used to validate the normality of the given viewpoint: the authority of the author, the narrator and the community (CI 77). The author is someone who sketches the process of society in an acceptable manner, observes convention and follows patterns. The discourse of the narrator fixes the narrative in recognizable and existentially referential circumstances. And the authority of the community comes from the fact that its representative is most often the family or the nation, is the specific locality, and the concrete historical moment. By referring to the authority of the author, I do not mean to accuse Tan of being an imperialist, but merely suggest that when she writes the novel, she has in her mind the American public as her imagined readers. When she represents Chinese culture and life in Changmian, she is molding the conception of them in her readers (especially those who seldom or never have experiences of Chinese culture) at the same time. And in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Olivia is endowed with the privilege to represent a foreign culture to her American audience through both photography of Changmian and her narrative about Kwan and Changmian. As for the authority of community, because the narrator, Olivia, grows up and lives in San Francisco, the

background of this community provides certain recognizable values and ideas to the American public at large. That is, the readers tend to identify with Olivia's representation of Changmian (even Chinese culture at large).

In short, through Said's discussion of Orientalism, one can see, as a mode of discourse, how it can shape westerners' conception of the Orient and the Orientals. As Said points out, the westerners use Manichean binary opposition to establish the idea of the "Europocentrism" in their cultures. In the novel, we can see how this Orientalist discourse affects the way Olivia and other American characters see Kwan and Changmian (or foreign cultures at large). Orientalism is so omnipresent that one can even find its traces in seemingly innocent arts such as photography. But we also see a hope of the termination of this racist discourse in Olivia's self-critique.

As a historical realization of Orientalism, western imperialism resulted in the mass scale of colonization of nearly two-thirds of the lands on earth, and the sufferings and subordination of the third-world people. By investigating the relationship between culture and imperialism, we see that literary texts can also display the unequal relation between powerful western cultures and comparatively weaker non-western cultures, as the formal design of the narrative structure in the novel implies. What is more, the latent existence of the empire provides the basis for the unequal relationship among close friends and even blood relationship. But all these observations do not suggest that there is not hope. As Foucault puts it, where there is power, there is resistance, and in the next chapter, we will see that "the Other" cannot be really appropriated by the violence of "the Self," as the historical relation between the West and the Orient shows.