Europeanness in Chinese Historical Perceptions

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EUROPE IN CHINESE EYES symbolizes an image in constant change. From China's diplomatic fiasco in the Paris Peace Conference which incited the May Fourth Movement protesting against imperialism to China's collaboration with some European countries in the Second World War; from isolation and xenophobia after the founding of the People's Republic of China to the increasing political, economic and cultural communications with Europeans after opening-up, Chinese attitude toward Europe has not been consistent in the last century.

Sino-European relationship after the foundation of PRC

The foundation of China in 1949 initiated the country's splitting attitudes toward Europe during the Maoist era as the Iron Curtain divided the European continent into West and East. After the founding of the PRC, Mao declared the policy of 'leaning to one side' (Gelber 2007: 331), i.e. the Eastern side in the East-West confrontation, whereas Western Europe was mainly perceived negatively due to its divergence from China's political and ideological positions. On the one hand, Mao's government banned nearly all western cultural institutions in mainland China and launched 'numerous campaigns against Western cultural influence' (Meissner, 2002). On the other hand, China maintained close relations with the socialist camp and benefited from their financial aids, experts and technological equipments initially after the PRC was founded (Yahuda, 2008). China's relationship with Eastern Europe experienced up-and-downs as well (Gelber 2007: 333-359) – from the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between China and the Soviet Union, which signified the first time any European country had admitted aid and strategic alliance to China and hence greatly welcomed in Beijing; to the break-up of the short-lived Sino-Soviet friendship after Stalin's death when the hardcore Beijing stood in direct opposite to Moscow in many strategic issues, which culminated to Soviets' tearing up the contracts and pulling back their advisers and experts from China.

With the 1971 Sino-American rapprochement, China started closer diplomatic relationship with Western European countries (Yahuda 2008). China's cultural exchange with major countries such as UK, France and Germany centered on artistic exhibitions, higher educational exchanges, and science and technology exchanges. The opening-up policy in 1979 signifies the end of Sino-European ideological conflicts when China discarded rigid communism and incorporated capitalist elements in economic and political operations, giving rise to China-European con-

tacts in various aspects of social life. Chinese began to form more comprehensive and objective opinions about Europeans. The end of Cold War signifies the outset of the independent relationship between China and Europe.

Europeanness in Perception

In an Internet poll 'Chinese World Views' undertaken by *Huanqiu* (Globaltimes) website in December 2011, Chinese netizens were invited to vote for the key words representing their impressions of major world countries. After tens of millions of votes, Chinese impressions of several European countries emerged as follows:

For Britain, a considerable amount of Chinese (25%) vote for 'colonialism' and the relating 'invasion', 'pillage' and 'imperialism', although Hong Kong, the last colony of the British Empire, has returned to China for fifteen years. With intense and dramatic entanglement with China for more than half a century, Russia is rated preeminently by Chinese netizens as 'tough', elucidated by 'military power' and 'vast territory with rich resources' (25.6%). In terms of the Russian character, current evaluations of the once 'elder brother' are rather negative – 'selfish', 'arrogant' and 'phlegmatic', possibly stemming from the unfavorable aspect of the two's relationship.

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When it comes to stereotypical impressions, Chinese links Britishness with in-decline (8.6), gentleman (8.2%), hypocrisy (7.7%) and conservatism (7.1%). German characters in Chinese perceptions are mainly associated with words like 'preciseness', 'diligence', 'discipline', 'low-profile' and 'rigidity' (totaling 35%). French and Italian national images, nevertheless, are comparatively more idealistic and romanticized. They are both unsurprisingly characterized as 'romantic', 'fashionable' and 'dissolute'. Besides, well-known Paris landmarks, luxury goods, Roman Empire and Renaissance have also become French and Italian cultural symbols.

Compared to other national images, Europe's rich histories, cultures and national characters distinguish among all the candidate countries. It's quite noticeable that most labels attached by Chinese to European countries fall into the stereotypical rhetoric, which is considered by

analysts to be originated from Chinese citizens' sensitivity to geopolitics, biased interests and knowledge concerning other countries, still a lack of personal contacts with Europeans and misleading media exaggerations.

From my interviews with three groups of Chinese classified as the elder, the middle-aged and the youth, it can be detected that there has been a perceptible transformation in Chinese perceptions of Europe across different generations and in some cases, across different stages in an individual's lifetime. In general, from the elder to the youths, the extent of the ambivalent sentiment accordingly deduces and the positive aspects arise more frequently in their discourses.

The majority of the elders interviewed mentioned that there used to be a lot of hatred toward the Western Europe due to historical disputes, however, they also admitted that many of them had limited knowledge of Europe as a consequence of China's self-containment and closeness from the West during a long historical period. They revealed that 'blindly worshiping and fawning foreign things and foreign countries' was a rather negative ideological accusation at the time, which restricted much of China's people-to-people contact with the Western Europe. 'If a person had anything to do with the West, the person was often repressed, persecuted or publicly isolated', said a seventy-six year-old, 'usually when a person, relatively few at that time, returned from his/her trip abroad, (s)he wouldn't dare to talk about how good the Western world was in public'.

The elders also often express a determined patriotism with an unequivocal distinction of 'them' and 'us', whereas in comparison most young interviewees claim that historical past doesn't influence much their perceptions of Europe, explaining that racism and unequal status have stopped being the major obstacle to Sino-European interaction and in its place are cultural shock, language barriers and lifestyle differences.

As for the sources of their diverse perceptions of Europe, all the interviewees affirmed that the media and cultural representations constitute and shape their knowledge and views. Nevertheless, there apparently exist differences over time in the extent to which people are influenced by these representations. People used to depend on mainstream media and cultural sources, such as radio broadcast, public film screenings, books and newspapers to access a rather remote image of Europe and these quite propagandistic representations prove to have had an overwhelming power on the audience's reception of the messages promoted. A forty-eight year-old said that in the past 'most people used to accept the official discourses' since they had 'rather limited access

to foreign things and with the absence of the Internet there were hardly any alternative ways to obtain information except for what was propagated'. However, nowadays the public sphere has changed as a result of the emergence of alternative new media. When asked about their contemporary views about past representations, many of the elders and middle-aged, expressed some suspect of the highly political and ideological representations in the past – 'now when I look back, the ultra-left ideologies were rather problematic and ridiculous'.

Among the four twenty year-olds interviewed though, nearly all of them developed an awareness of critically accepting the European image promoted by mainstream media, due to both personal experiences and the relatively free information flow. One of the interviewees even claims that he prefers to form his own version of the European image through direct contacts and communications with the natives rather than believing in the media, books or films, because he thinks media or cinematic representations of Europe are 'not thorough enough'. Most interviewees of the youth group envisions quite optimistically of inevitably increasing future exchanges and cultural incorporations between Europe and China meanwhile being aware of the obstacles that they have to traverse before reaching for a better conversation.

Last Notes

General Chinese perceptions of Europe reveal that the Eastern China's interpretation of Europeanness retains much similarity with Orientalism. Both Othering pathways build on the common ground of an 'ontological and epistemological' man-made distinction between the Orient and the Occident' (Said, 2003).

Like Orientalism, Europeanness in the Chinese context ceases to be the Real (the material Real), i.e. an entity with material reality and existence – its geographical shape, nations, people, customs, but becomes the real (the symbolic real), i.e. a network of symbolic ideas manipulated by Chinese 'mindset' – be it a clear-cut distinguish between 'them' and 'us', or a strategic labeling of 'friend' or 'enemy'.

This very similarity in Chinese views of Europe and European views of China renders the Orientalist theory parochial, as the cultivation of otherness is not a one-way projection that Europe imposes on the Orient but rather a ubiquitous stereotyping process that all cultures follow to exaggerate distinctions as a means to make sense of the world.

Fortunately, efforts are invested to change such discursive assumptions based on simple binary oppositions and our young interviewees have already given positive signs for this change. In fact, a predominant majority of contemporary Chinese citizens have a positive to very positive view toward Europe more than most other countries and regard Europeans as trustworthy.

In terms of EU-China relationship, most Chinese citizens consider more and deeper cooperation between the two is necessary and supported. Researches also show that on a personal level, Chinese citizens who have more knowledge and interest in Europe and who are aware of the 'internal complexities of Europe' are more likely to view Europe and Europeans favorably despite sometimes negative media and cultural messages, which proves that knowledge's decisive power in reducing and eliminating estrangement, suspicion and misunderstandings in international communications.

Walking out of the shadow of past ambivalent sentiment towards Europe, the contemporary China is in the process of re-forming a much more dispassionate view about Europe, which neither dwells on the lingering nightmare of a humiliating past nor clings to the illusionary creation of a utopian perfection.

This objective amity toward Europe in Chinese public perceptions is quite significant in forwarding a benign people-to-people diplomacy that influences foreign policies, business trade, educational and cultural exchanges. This objective amity indicates, at least from China's side, a committed dedication to the maintaining of a potentially long-term positive and beneficial partnership between Europe and China in the future. ∎

A MATTER OF CENTRISM

Starting with the world mapping, Europe has been adopting a Eurocentric value ever since the Renaissance, when Europeans started to take pride in their achievements and civilizations. By placing Europe at the top and the centre of the world with an disproportionately enlarged continent, maps in the 16th century Europe displayed an immodest sense that Europe is not 'an equal part of the world', but rather a dominator of it.

This self-centric geographic portrayal exerted its larger impact on European psychology and intellectual on the whole, as well as Europe's relationship with other continents in the following centuries. As its earliest and richest colony, the Orient becomes an object of Europe's fantasies and the 'Oriental myth' is often depicted with exoticism and romanticized beliefs.

With the opening of the New Route sponsored by the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs during the 15th and 16th century, Europe took the initiative and started the active exploration of the Oriental lands after conquering oceans and navigating distances, thus and so defined most of the Occidental-Oriental encounters after the 16th century, where the subject Occident remained for a long time the active observer approaching a comparatively passive object the Orient.

The consistent Orientalism calls into question the relationship between the 'West' and the 'East' and invokes the curiosity into the other side of the problem, namely the Eastern construction of the West. Under the discursive strength of Eurocentrism and Orientalism, the Oriental China has been pictured and defined for numerous times in European cultural texts, with its color, sound and motion imagery filtered into the Western aesthetic, sociological, historical and political constructions; while in comparison the reversed observations about a Chinese construction of Europe have been considerably less.

Hence a gap-filling insight of how 'Europeanness' has been perceived in China seems quite needed.

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