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The Legacy and the Future of Orientalism

Lidan Lin

More than two decades have passed since the publication of Edward Said’s seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), a study that has brought many exciting changes to the literary studies in the United States, changes that have directly led to the emergence of such new fields as postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Few contemporary American intellectuals have had the influence Said has had on the ways we think about literature, about ourselves as intellectuals, and about the relationship between literature, empire, culture, knowledge, society, ethics, and politics. Indeed, Said’s contributions to Anglo-American literary studies can hardly be overestimated. Among the legacies Said has left behind, orientalism is one that particularly interests me. As we may still freshly remember, one outcome of postcolonial studies and cultural studies is the booming scholarship on what we now call “new literatures” that deal with Europe’s colonial encounters with its overseas colonies. In light of Saidian orientalism, new readings of the entire nineteenth and twentieth century English literature have shown remarkable vigor and credibility. Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Rhys, to name a few, have all been reexamined through the lens of orientalism. Admittedly, a large portion of postcolonial scholarship to date has sought to demonstrate the unflattering relationship between literature, colonialism, and the lingering impact of colonialism on the postcolonial world. It reveals, in many cases, the Western imperialist perception and representation of the Orient. What has inspired this kind of new cultural readings of literature is, in part, Said’s profound ethical appeal, his sense of social responsibility, and his moral consciousness. Such
flourishing scholarship paralleled the booming growth and expansion of college programs and curricula. New programs such as cultural studies and new curricula such as postcolonial literature, third world literature, and resistance literature came into existence. Leela Gandhi succinctly summarizes Said's achievements this way: Said "single-handedly moved matters of colony and empire center stage in Anglo-American literary and cultural history" (65).

Said's theory of orientalism has also proved to be a challenge since its publication, and some of these challenges have been taken up by such critics as Dennis Porter and Timothy Brennan. Approaching orientalism from the perspective of travel literature, Porter worries about Said's reductive assumptions underlying orientalism, the lumping of orientalist discourse into one master category of hegemony. In doing so, Porter argues, Said fails to "reflect on hegemony as process . . . [and to] envisage the possibility that more directly counter-hegemonic writings or an alternative canon may exist within the Western tradition" (153). Porter invokes Marco Polo's Travels and T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom to show that both works contain epistemological and narrative modes that simultaneously support and unsettle the myth of hegemony. Porter also points out orientalism's limited scope, since it defines the Orient as Eastern Mediterranean and South East Asia, and it deals mainly with the British, French, and American experience of the Orient. I share Porter's apprehension with regard to the problem of hegemony, and join him in urging continued dialogues with orientalism, for I see three further limitations. The first concerns orientalism's limited historical scope that virtually omits pre-Enlightenment Western contacts with the Orient. East-West contacts were no less active prior to the eighteenth century, and authors such as Dante, Samuel Purchase, Edmund Spenser, and Horace Walpole were actively engaged in dialogues with Eastern cultures, and such dialogues were clearly registered in their works. The second relates to orientalism's limited geographical scope that has virtually left out the colonial and postcolonial experience of nations other than those in the Muslim Orient, Africa, and the Caribbean, and—in a larger scale—East-West contacts that occurred cannot be strictly labeled as colonial. As a result, Europe's encounters with such East-Asian countries as China, Japan, and Korea are inadequately studied. The third lies in orientalism's limited disciplinary scope that mainly deals with orientalism in literature. This approach is justified given the circumscribed scope of Said's project, but because of this approach, much of the scholarship on postcolonial studies has focused on literature. What really happened is the Western representation of and response to Eastern peoples and cultures appear in a variety of cultural forms. Western painters such as Sam Francis, Paul Klee, André Masson and musicians such as John Cage, Maurice Ravel, and Claude Debussy all incorporated Eastern elements in their arts, not to mention Eastern influences on such Western philosophers and thinkers as Francis Bacon, Voltaire, Arthur Schopenhauer, Jacques Lacan, G. W. F. Hegel, and Carl Jung.

Because Orientalism has largely encouraged one way of looking at the West's relationship to the East by emphasizing the West's privileged power over
the East in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, it is imperative that we seek alternative critical idioms to account for these relations that do not neatly fall within the scope of orientalism. The question here is how can we expand the theory of orientalism from a model of domination to a more inclusive model that would go beyond the epistemic, historical, geographical, and disciplinary restrictions set in Orientalism? Here I propose the notion of post-orientalism as a new perspective to help us think about how we, its inheritors, can further develop this important legacy. Here the “post” in post-orientalism first suggests a historical continuity between the decades in which the model of domination informed much of postcolonial scholarship and the years when critics began to point out the limitations of this model. What connects these two phases is the common notion of orientalism as a Western academic and imaginative discourse about the Orient. Second, the “post” means moving beyond the limited scope of orientalism I outlined above. In this sense, the “post” also suggests a departure from orientalism. This departure involves innovative and ethically engaging ways of exploring Western representation of and response to its Eastern counterparts and of evaluating the impact of such representation and response on Western civilizations and cultures. To put it simply, this departure emphasizes inclusion, openness, and flexibility. However, the “post” does not simply signify a point of departure since there were studies prior to the publication of Orientalism that sought to reveal the West’s non-domineering dialogues with the East. Marie E. de Meester’s Oriental Influences in the English Literature of the Nineteenth Century (1915), for example, demonstrates the appreciation and appropriation of Eastern elements by such authors as Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, and Thackeray. Their fascination with the Eastern land of wonders rings loud in George Eliot’s remarks:

No act of religious symbolism has a deeper root in nature than that of turning with reverence to the East. For almost all our good things—our most precious vegetables, our noblest animals, our loveliest flowers, our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery-tales and romances have traveled to us from the East. In a historical as well as in a physical sense, the East is the land of the morning (qtd. in Meester 1).

Similarly, Christy Arthur’s The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott shows Eastern influence as a positive source of inspiration for these American transcendentalists. To the extent that the kind of orientalism of these authors is comparable with what we now term as post-orientalism, the latter is best seen as designating both a historical and a-historical division. Another relevant concept here is the definition of the Orient; in order for post-orientalism to be inclusive, we must expand the Orient to include all of Asia, which lies geographically to the East of Europe. By acknowledging the complexity and heterogeneity underlying East-West relations, post-orientalism opens up a new space for free-spirited investigations of other models
than orientalism that describe East-West relations. Yet post-orientalism does not rule out the model of domination since Western domination of the Orient was and still is a reality and does exist in literature and other cultural forms. If post-orientalism can be seen as a model of inclusion, then engaging post-orientalism is no longer only or mainly the task of postcolonial and cultural critics; it no longer only pertains to colonial and postcolonial literature or literature with colonial or postcolonial implications. Post-orientalism is now relevant to all interested in the Western representation of the Orient and in the Eastern influences on Western literature and culture, where the notion of post-orientalism as a non-hegemonic Western academic and imaginative discourse applies. The expansion of orientalism beyond its various restrictions and the establishment of post-orientalism as a new object of inquiry offer a new opportunity not only for the study of Western literature, but for the study of Western arts and other cultural forms.

The new emphasis on the broadened scope of orientalism nicely coincides with the recent move toward understanding Western literature in its global context, a move advocated by such critics as Giles Gunn, Stephen Greenblatt, and Paul Jay. For these critics, the study of Western literature has followed a predominantly nationalist model that lays emphasis on cultural continuity and homogeneity in the study of national literatures. As a result, the global influence on Western literature has largely been neglected, although comparative literature and other comparative studies have dealt with some aspects of this topic. Post-orientalism thus converges with the global approach to literature in that both admit and seek to illuminate the hybrid and multicultural constituents of literature. The key is to pay attention to the ways in which the continuity and homogeneity of national literatures are intersected and blocked by the process of global contacts because—as Greenblatt suggests—it is these “disruptive forces, not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy that principally shape the history of language [and literature]” (62, cf. also Gunn). The espousal of a global understanding of Western literature can very well be extended to the espousal of a global understanding of Western culture since all aspects of Western culture, of which Western literature is a part, embody the traces of Eastern contribution. Nowadays, when visitors go to see the gardens in Europe, few would realize that many of them were constructed by imitating the Chinese landscape style that stresses artistic affinity to Nature. Among those are the English gardens Dropmore near Windsor, Stowe in Buckinghamshire, Twickenham near London, and the French gardens Petit Trianon, Le Rouge, and the Desert de Monville (cf. Siren). When viewing paintings in museums, few people would know that many of the impressionist masterpieces incorporated Eastern elements, particularly, the Chinese and Japanese arts (cf. Dufwa). By the same token, when people have meals in Italian restaurants, few would be aware of the fact that Marco Polo brought back to Italy the noodle-making cookery from China. My main point is that the global approach to Western literature and culture will further demystify the East-West division and help us see the indispensable partnership
between the East and the West. In light of the theory of globalization, we may make another distinction between orientalism and post-orientalism.

Within the expanded scope of post-orientalism, we can roughly speak of two models of Western engagement with the East. The first is the "representational model" in which Westerners offer accounts of the Orient in non-hegemonic manners. Pearl Buck's fictional and non-fictional accounts of China belong to this model to the extent that Buck's accounts display her sympathy for the Chinese and her struggle to understand them from the perspective of a Westerner. First brought to China by her missionary parents, Buck lived most of her first forty years in China and gained immense knowledge of the country, its culture, and its people. Her China-related writings such as *The Good Earth, The Living Reed, East Wind, West Wind, A House Divided* betray her awareness of the tensions between the East and the West as well as her aspirations to resolve these tensions. The second is the "influence model" in which Eastern influences play a role in shaping Western literary and cultural texts that are situated in the Western context. Some of T. S. Eliot's poems and commentaries fall within this model. Unlike Buck, Eliot's knowledge of Eastern cultures and thoughts came from his education and self-study. Before becoming an undergraduate at Harvard, Eliot had read Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1891), a poem based on the life of Buddha. Eliot is known to have sustained his love for the poem throughout his life (Kearns 67). When Eliot enrolled at Harvard as an undergraduate, he gathered from his mentor Irving Babbit the importance of a well-rounded education by absorbing both Eastern and Western traditions. Later, when Eliot began his graduate studies in philosophy at Harvard, he read Eastern cultural and religious texts under the guidance of his professors James Woods and Charles Lanman. Eliot was deeply drawn to Indian and Chinese thoughts, particularly those of balance, non-dualism, purity, and reconciliation. In *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1935-1942), Eliot expressed his fond appreciation of these ideas and showed how they could serve as antidotes for the Western malaises of sterility, apathy, and materialism. Because the global feature of Western literature and culture is more often assumed than explored, pursuing post-orientalism would shed surprising light on the hybrid constituents of literary and cultural texts by authors, artists, and thinkers considered canonically Western. The following illustrates four cases through Huxley, Masson, Debussy, and Lacan.

To many readers of English literature, Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) is known as the author of the satiric novel *Brave New World*, and Huxley is often aligned with other satiric authors, such as Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, and George Orwell. Few readers recognize that the Huxley who wrote *Brave New World* represents an author in the early stage of his development as a novelist and a philosopher, a stage when his mature philosophy and artistic vision had not come into shape. Even fewer readers recognize that some of Huxley's literary and philosophical texts are the direct result of his life-long dialogue with Eastern cultures. This situation is due, in part, to the fact that literary historians, biographers, and critics are in general brought up and educated in the West; therefore
they are familiar mostly with Western cultures and traditions. When they come to write about Western authors, they usually associate them with Western cultural, intellectual, and literary traditions. In some cases when they do pay attention to certain authors' contacts with Eastern traditions, they usually gloss over these contacts and do not properly evaluate them. Generally speaking, introductions to Western authors in encyclopedias, anthologies, and literary guides do not mention their exchanges with non-Western cultures, or even the fact that such exchanges exist. The study of Huxley faces the same dilemma, as his biographer Sibille Bedford totally omitted Huxley's life-long interest in Eastern cultures. Although another biographer, Nicholas Murray, briefly mentioned Huxley's interest in Eastern wisdom religions, he did not do justice to the significant role of Eastern wisdom in shaping Huxley's literary and philosophic visions. Such an omission is now corrected by Dana Sawyer's new biography (cf. Lin). It is now known that Huxley had been actively engaged in the study of Indian and Chinese wisdom religions since his twenties. His friendship with Gerald Heard, a religious philosopher, led Huxley to turn from ascetic mysticism to Vedanta and Mahayana mysticism that advocates the transformation of individuals through their participation in public activities. Later, his affiliation with the Hollywood Vedanta Center and his study under Hindu gurus Swami Prabhavananda and Swami Vivekananda further deepened his knowledge of Hinduism. The impact of these Eastern wisdom religions is clearly reflected in Huxley's poetry, drama, fiction, and philosophical texts. Because Huxley's works embody the traces of Eastern influences, the traditional nationalist approach is not sufficient, for it undervalues the richness of Huxley's writings.

The French painter André Masson (1896-1987) is known as a surrealist artist and is frequently associated with such surrealists as André Breton, Joan Miró, and Max Ernst. He joined the surrealist movement in the early 1920s, and then withdrew from it in the early 1930s, focusing instead on the human condition—the fundamental impulses of love and hatred—and reacting to the Spanish Civil War. In the early 1940s, Masson moved to America and became interested in mythical imagery. Many of his paintings from this period show a focus on African American and Native American myths, and the style of his expression and brushwork influenced many young American painters. In Western art history, the influence on Masson is often linked to such Western figures as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Cézanne, J. M. W. Turner, and Vincent van Gogh. And yet, what inspired Masson's art, especially during the 1950s, is more than Western traditions. After Masson moved to America, he experienced an important period of transition, a period that can be fittingly called the Oriental period. Prior to this Oriental period, Masson moved to L'Harmas, a country villa, in an effort to search for the art of mist to paint in the impressionist manner. This practice would serve as a bridge to his experimental period with Oriental techniques. Masson was especially attracted to the Chinese Zen/Chan technique in which the Chinese painters minimize the use of space and diffuse the possession of objects in such a way as to make the limited space embody the infinite life
force. For Masson, the portrait of Li Po, the Chinese Tang poet, precisely illustrates these principles:

The Chinese painter speaks not of space but of life force. For the European, it's always a limit; for the Asiatic it is (implicitly) the unlimited. . . . a masterpiece that touches me like no other is the portrait of Li Po by Liang K'ai. The illustrious personage strolls through space without shadow and without detail" (qtd. in Rubin and Lanchner 183).

Admittedly, it is not easy for someone familiar with Western art tradition that stresses filling the space with objects to come to adore the dispersal of objects. It took Masson many years to be able to do away with the Western possessive impulse. Another technique Masson learned from the Chinese is the idea of totality, the idea of "being and none-being as one" (Rubin and Lanchner 190), which requires blurring the division of objects and making them meld with its surrounding space to achieve a sense of the continuity of being. His paintings "Flight of a Partridge" (1950), "Cascade in Winter" (1951), and "The Abyss" (1955) all display his efforts to achieve the sense of the continuity of being. From surrealism to post-orientalism, from Cézannesque and Turneresque styles to Zen/Chan/Tao styles, Masson's paintings have clearly traveled beyond the border of Europe to embrace the cultural heritage of Far Eastern China. Due to such border-crossing, an awareness of the Eastern contribution to Masson's art will enable us to appreciate his paintings more fully.6

In the area of Western music, one tends to come across similar traces of Eastern influences: Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky, and John Cage were all intrigued by Eastern traditions. Because of limited space, my remarks will be devoted to Debussy (1862-1918), who, for many lovers of music, is known as the founder and leading exponent of French musical impressionism and the most influential piano composer since Chopin. Debussy is also known to have brought many innovative notions to music that challenged classical, particularly Wagnerian, rules, and to want his music to follow the rhythm of the heart, not any predetermined theory. However, few people are aware that integrated in Debussy's music are elements of Eastern tendencies and sentiments, which, together with Russian folk music, helped him develop his impressionist style. Debussy's interest in Eastern cultures began in 1902 when he met Louis Laloy, a French orientalist and musicologist, who acquired extensive knowledge of Chinese culture and music and lectured on them in Paris. In 1900, Laloy published a special study on Chinese music entitled La Music Chinoise, in which he not only gave an account of the history of Chinese musical theory, but he spoke fondly of the Taoist influence on the Chinese lute music. In 1931, Laloy was sent to China on a cultural mission, and his book Mirror of China (1936) was based on this experience. Laloy became so fond of the Chinese way of life that he adopted Chinese dress and chose to have a Chinese butler, who was "a model of punctiliousness, honesty, and devotion" (Laloy, Mirror 143) after he returned
to France. Laloy and Debussy became close friends and had many exchanges on matters concerning music. Laloy wrote many reviews of Debussy’s music and his biography. From Laloy, Debussy gained familiarity with Chinese music, literature, and other non-Western cultures. By emphasizing the resemblance of music to nature and by stressing the unity and interconnection of sounds, Debussy’s music made an important departure from classical music that submits sounds to the obedience of abstract and rational rules. In addition to French impressionism in painting and Russian folk music, Eastern traditions certainly encouraged such a departure. In his endeavor to liberate Western music from traditional regulations, Debussy consciously imitated the “Chinese taste” (Laloy, On Debussy 82) in which music “allows itself irregularities which moreover are hardly noticed, because they have come from inspiration. . . . [in which] there are succession of whole tones, shyly indifferent; and more frequently, incomplete scales, in which the whole tone alternates only with the minor third” (82). The result of such imitation is “Pagodes” from Estampes, Pelleas, the Nocturnes, The Proses lyriques, and the Prélude a L’Après-midi d’un faune. What distinguishes these pieces is precisely the breakdown of the separation of notes and scales so that they become scarcely distinguishable; they “proceed one from another; and the joining points are no longer perceived” (82). Laloy explains the unity of music this way: “That is the secret of unity which is not guaranteed by external means, does not have signposts, but relies on the natural succession of impressions. It is the unity of a character, of a landscape; in a word, it is unity of tone. . . . not in the narrow acceptation of music theory, but in the less definite sense given to it by poets and painters” (82). In this sense, Laloy is right that the Chinese, like the Hindus and the Senegalese, have been “impressionists and even symbolists without knowing it” (89).

The case of Jacques Lacan—Europe’s most eminent Freudian psychoanalyst—offers a good example of how Western culture intersects Eastern thoughts. Yet, despite Lacan’s powerful influence on European psychoanalytical science and on contemporary Euro-Anglo literary theory, particularly psychoanalytical theory and feminist theory, his encounter with the East has remained largely unknown and, because of this, my account of Lacan will be more detailed. Thanks to the publication of Lacan’s biography by Elisabeth Roudinesco, we now know that he studied Chinese at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris during the Occupation. However, because Roudinesco’s account of Lacan’s Eastern connections is relatively brief, her book can serve as a starting point for exploring these connections. We can assume that Lacan also read extensively about Eastern thoughts since he made frequent references to Chinese, Hindu, and Buddhist thoughts in Écrits (1966), The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1973), and The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX Encore 1972-1973 (1975). In 1969, Lacan sought out the sinologist François Cheng and indulged in another vigorous study of Chinese language and thoughts, which lasted four years until Cheng had to devote time to the writing of his two books Poetic Chinese Writing and The Language of Chinese Painting. Both books won Lacan’s “approbation” (Cheng 1). Lacan made it clear from the beginning that
he wanted to "become acquainted, or in some cases, reacquainted, with certain areas of Chinese thought in the most authentic possible manner, through the study of the original texts, line by line and word by word" (Cheng 1). During the four years, Lacan demonstrated "incredibly tenacious and open-minded way of questioning the meaning of our texts" in a way that Cheng felt that he was the one who "benefited more from [their] intense, and sometimes, exhausting exchanges" (Cheng 1).

Beside learning elements of the Chinese language, such as "personal pronouns, prepositions, and the Chinese way of expressing time" (Cheng 1), Cheng and Lacan studied three Chinese texts chosen by Lacan: Tao Te-Ching by Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, Mencius by Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, and Remarks About the Art of Bitter-Pumkin the Monk by Shitao, a poet and painter. Lacan selected two chapters from Tao Te-Ching, the scriptural text of Taoism, for close discussion with Cheng. The first explains Tao as the origin of the universe and its subtle relationship with its outcomes. The gist of this relationship goes like this: the original Tao, the void, gives birth to the One; the One gives birth to the Two, which contains Yin, the receptive mildness, and Yang, the active strength; the Two gives birth to the Three; the three gives birth to ten thousand things. The second chapter further explains the subtle identity of Tao: Tao is the nameless and the named; it is ineffable, yet it manifests everywhere; all outcomes of Tao are one with Tao. As for the text Mencius, Lacan was quite drawn to Mencius's way of placing man in a triadic relation with heaven and earth, which, for Lacan, corresponds to the Taoist triad—Yin, Yang, and the original breath/void. In both Tao Te-Ching and Mencius, Lacan saw the importance of the number three for the Chinese, and he would later adopt this three-dimensional concept in revising his own theory of being. Lacan also found Confucius's ethical ideals attractive and liked Confucius's espousal of the harmonious and reciprocal human relationship, in which "[h]e thinks only as much as he is thought through all his important encounters with others. In this way, he feels connected, and his small self is advantageously transcended" (Cheng 6). From Shitao's text, which Lacan studied in depth, he further learned the Taoist relationship between the One and the many from the perspective of painting. The key to Shitao's book is the underlying philosophy of the Single Brush Stroke, in which the artist begins a piece with a single line on a sheet of paper. Then "through its upstrokes and down strokes, its yin and yang, its pace and rhythm, the line is already shape and motion, volume and color" (Cheng 9). For Lacan, the production of a piece of painting with an uninterrupted movement of brush corresponds to the Taoist notion of creation in that the first line is akin to the One begotten by the original Tao; this line then generates more lines, which resemble the Two, the Three, and the Ten-thousand. Like the creation by Tao, the creation by the artist is mythical because, like the inexhaustible Tao, the potential of the brush is inexhaustible (Cheng 9). Toward the end of his study with Cheng, Lacan read Antonietta Macciocchi's book China, met with the author, and told her about his Oriental yearnings (Roudinesco 353). So fascinated by what he had learned about China, Lacan asked Antonietta to go to China with
him. Indeed, a trip was arranged, and Lacan was supposed to go to visit the Maoist China with Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, and others; only due to some personal uneasiness with Sollers, Lacan withdrew from the trip (Roudinesco 353-54).

Lacan’s encounters with Chinese and Indian philosophies had been fruitful even before his private study with Cheng, and manifestations of such fruitfulness abound in *Ecrits*. As is well known, Lacan was highly critical of Western egotism and aggressiveness. What disturbs him is how, in the West, egotism and aggressiveness are readily accepted as “normal morality” (25) and “confused... with the virtue of strength” (25). Here Lacan evokes the Chinese notion of Yang to show that the West’s tolerance of and admiration for aggressiveness is analogous to the way Yang holds “meaning and virtue... in the public and private morality of the Chinese” (25). Lacan’s reference to Yang in this context shows that he accurately understood the importance of the Yang element in Confucian thought and its penetrating influence on Chinese morality. This reference also betrays Lacan’s reservations about the masculine principle underlying Confucianism and his preference for the feminine principle underlying Taoism. In another context when Lacan was explaining how the analyst could appeal to the power of the symbolic language in analysis, he summons a popular Hindu folk tale about a dog being devoured by a lion to illustrate his point (82). Again, in his discussion of Freud’s notion of dream as having the structure of a sentence, or the form of writing, Lacan compares the dream to Chinese ideographic and Egyptian hieroglyphic writing that “reproduces the simultaneously phonetic and symbolic use of signifying elements” (57). Part of Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory deals with the relationship between language and being, and—as is well known—Lacan designates the reciprocal function of language as the sole locus of being. As he writes: “[I]t is in the gift of speech that all the reality of its effects resides; for it is by way of this gift that all reality has come to man and it is by this continued act that he maintains it” (106). Here Lacan vividly recounts the famous conversation between the Devas, the men, and the Asuras and the god of thunder Prajapati in *Upanishad* to show that the power of both the divine god above and the creatures below submit to the reciprocal power of speech in the sense that the three pieces of advice given by the god of thunder would have been meaningless had the listeners below not responded to the adviser god (106).

Lacan’s use of Chinese philosophy found another example in the chapter “The Eye and the Gaze” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Here Lacan was elucidating his thesis: “the locus of the real lies in the field of the other” by appealing to the scopic power of gaze. In order to show the dialectical relationship between the gazer and the object of gaze, Lacan conjures up the story of Chuang Tzu. The Taoist philosopher once dreamed of himself becoming a butterfly, and when he woke up, he did not know if he was the butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu or he was Chuang Tzu dreaming he was a butterfly. Lacan used this anecdote to show that precisely because of Chuang Tzu’s confusion, he arrived at the “roots of his identity... that he was Chuang Tzu
for others” (76) when he was awake since he was a butterfly for nobody in the
dream. In the chapter “Sexuality in the Defiles of the Signifier” in the same
book, Lacan pointed out the inadequacy of Freud’s theory of the unconscious
that assumes that the unconscious is an enigmatic and unattainable sexual real­
ity. Lacan argues that this enigmatic sexual reality actually manifests itself at all
levels of social structures, thus linking biological reproduction to social func­
tioning, through which the signifier comes into play. To illustrate the “affinity
between the enigmas of sexuality and the play of signifier,” Lacan alludes to
Chinese astronomy to show that it is based on the “play of signifiers that rever­
berate . . . the social structure, ethics, the regulation of the slightest acts” (151).
Within this constellation of signifiers, the “secondary sexual characteristics”
(150) reside in such combinatory divisions as the diurnal and the nocturnal.
Lacan’s knowledge of Chinese philosophy and culture not only provided
him with inspiring frames of reference to aid the articulation of his theories, but
it helped him think through some of his most difficult theoretical questions. It
is through his encounter with Chinese philosophy and culture, especially his pri­
vate study with Cheng, that Lacan significantly advanced and perfected his the­
ory of being/subjectivity, the core of which is the location of the real, the reality
of being. Prior to his study with Cheng, Lacan had made important discoveries
on this question and presented them in the following chapters: “The
Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” “The Subversion of the Subject and
the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” and “The Field of the
Other and Back to the Transference.” At these stages, Lacan’s main concern is
the demystification of Freud’s narcissistic unconscious, the doubling or the split
of the subject, and the affirmation of the intersubjective function of the other.
From a structuralist point of view, Lacan’s theory of being rests on a dyadic or
dialectical structure of the self and the other, the child and his/her mirror image,
the real and the symbolic, the primordial and the symbolic, the unconscious and
the social, the biological and the social, and so on and so forth. Such dialectical
mode of thinking came to a breakthrough after his reengagement with Lao Tzu’s
Tao Te-Ching during his study in the early 1970s. In the first chapter he studied,
it read:

The original Tao gave birth to the One
The One gave birth to the Two
The Two gave birth to the Three
And the Three gave birth to the Ten-thousand things
The Ten thousand things carry Yin and embrace Yang
Through the breath of the original void, they reach exchange
and understanding (Cheng 2).

What struck Lacan as being revelatory is the subtle function of the Three that
mediates between the Two, the original Tao, and the Ten thousand things; with­
out the Three, this whole creation process would not have been possible. Lacan
was equally impressed by Confucius’s triadic scheme of heaven, earth, and man
as mentioned in *Mencius*. What further intrigued Lacan is the way the Chinese see these triadic structures as being contained in a whole entity; for the Chinese it is the wholeness, the unity, the integrity of this three-dimensional scheme that matters. With his refreshed knowledge of Chinese philosophy, Lacan went back to engage the question of being during 1972 and 1973; this time he was “to make use of the notion of the median-void for his new definition of the real, within the framework of his theory of [Borrowmean] knot” (Roudinesco 352). What Lacan did was to extend the three Borrowmean rings (or Borrowmean knot) into a circle of infinite rings in such a way that if one ring is cut, all the other rings would fall loose (*Encore* 124-25). Originally the three Borrowmean rings are linked in such a way that if one ring is cut, the other two would fall apart. By ingenuously adding infinite rings to the original three rings, Lacan made Borrowmean rings resemble the Taoist model of creation: the first ring corresponds to the One engendered by the original Tao, the second ring corresponds to the Two, and the third ring corresponds to the Three. Through the median, Three infinite rings are born and linked together in a continuous manner and can be closed at any point. This circle represents for Lacan the unveiled mystery of being. In this circle, the distinction between the One and its other—the Two, the Three, and Ten thousand rings, between cause and effect, between origin and outcome, between subject and object disappears. All rings stand in a relation of “reciprocity” (*Encore* 127). In the absence of this distinction each ring touches or intersects all other rings in such mythical and continuous way as to engender a never-ending stream of creation, which is the very essence of the Taoist (and the Hindu) idea of the mystic continuity of being. Reciprocally, the whole circle becomes equivalent to the One (*Encore* 127). But Lacan still had to confront the question of the other; where is the other now in this circle? Lacan said the other was “the One-missing” (*Encore* 129), which means the One and the other are present or absent simultaneously. Thus, from his earlier focus on the doubling or the split of the subject as an individual to his refocus on the mythical unity and continuity of all beings; from his earlier emphasis on the other as difference to his new emphasis on the other as identity; from his earlier interest in a dyadic vision of being to his new interest in a triadic and collective vision of being, Lacan clearly achieved a tremendous theoretical leap. There is little doubt that Lacan’s encounter with Chinese philosophy and culture played a vital role in fostering such leap.

While Said’s main purpose in *Orientalism* is to show Western imperialistic arrogance and colonial violence and Oriental natives’ suffering from such arrogance and violence, the main purpose of post-orientalism is to show Western deviations from imperialism on the one hand and the positive impact of Oriental cultures on Western literature and culture on the other. The conjunction of post-orientalism and globalism is where I see the future of orientalism. Thus, paying attention to post-orientalism is the same thing as paying attention to the global influence on Western literature and culture. Such attention will not only suggest new readings of literary and cultural texts themselves, especially those habitu-
ally read against Western background, but it will also shed new light on literary and cultural history of the West.

Notes

1. I began the research for this essay when I was teaching in South Dakota and would like to thank Black Hills State University for the research grant that assisted the translation of the French materials into English on the Lacan section. I have been fortunate to enjoy the affective support of my son Yuhao and my family in China. I dedicate this essay to those loving and the loved.

2. Being a doctoral student in the late 1990s, I have drawn on Said’s theory of orientalism in my scholarship, particularly, in my work on Forster and Coetzee, besides the present essay.

3. Said’s definition of orientalism mainly refers to a hegemonic Western academic discourse for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Many will admit that Said is right in identifying the hegemonic character of orientalism because he persuasively shows that the liberal tradition of the West did not succeed in curbing the expansion of Western empires. However, I share Porter’s concern that designating the historical outcome of Western imperialism as the primary basis for theorizing orientalism is limiting because such methodology risks obscuring the complexity of orientalism as a historical process, in which many Westerners have written sympathetically about the Orient. Worthy of note is that Said himself seemed aware of the problem of hegemony in Culture and Imperialism (1993), in which his readings of Conrad, Forster, and Edward Carpenter demonstrate his awareness of the two ideological and ethical sides of these authors; that is, they are simultaneously supportive and critical of England’s colonial mission. But since Porter published his essay in 1994, at about the same time as Culture and Imperialism, his criticism of Orientalism still makes much sense. Timothy Brennan presented another challenge to Orientalism. His main reservation is the widely believed myth that Orientalism spurred the emergence of postcolonial studies. For Brennan, Said owes a tremendous debt to poststructuralism and their representatives such as Michel Foucault, Theodore Roszak, Noam Chomsky, Herbert Marcus, Bertrand Russell, Vico, Gramsci, and Raymond Williams, and yet such important intellectual lineages have not been properly evaluated (Brennan 558).

4. For an enlightened discussion of Orientalism in Samuel Purchase, Edmund Spenser, and Horace Walpole, see Qian Zhongshu, 29-68. For Orientalism in Dante, see Brenda D. Schildgen, Dante and the Orient (92-134).

5. Jacques Dufwa’s Winds from the East: A Study in the Art of Manet, Degas, Monet and Whistler 1856-86, and Osvald Siren’s China and the Gardens of Europe of the Eighteenth Century also illuminate the positive impact of Japanese visual art on French impressionist painting and the Chinese gardening techniques on European landscape culture. See also Alexander Macfie, Eastern Influences on Western Philosophy.

6. The American painter Sam Francis was also influenced by the Taoist and Buddhist idea of the void. See Michel Waldberg, Sam Francis: Metaphysics of the Void.

7. For more on Oriental influences on Debussy, see R. Howat. For Oriental influences on Ravel and Stravinsky see Louis Laloy, 1999: 246, 184-192. For Oriental influences on John Cage, see Christopher Shultis, 56-57, 91-92; and David Patterson, John Cage, and Joan Retallack, Musicage.
8. The English translation of François Cheng’s essay “Lacan and Chinese Thought,” originally written in French, was provided by Marie C. Jones and assisted by a research grant from Black Hills State University. I am grateful for Marie’s invaluable assistance. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Roudinesco, who generously gave me the French version of François Cheng’s article.

Works Cited


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