**Rethinking the inferiority complex: Chinese opinions on Westerners’
knowledge of Chinese (1910s-1930s)**

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Abstract

Early 20th-century China was, it has been said, plagued by an ‘inferiority complex’, that is, the notion that Western culture was superior to the Chinese one. Consequently, many Chinese intellectuals learnt English, learnt about the West and studied abroad. Drawing upon Westerners’ manuscript collections, Chinese diaries, letters and published articles from the 1910s to the early 1930s, this paper argues that the ‘inferiority complex’ drew a line when it came to attitudes about what Westerners could know about China and its language. Pro-Western intellectuals, from famous Hu Shi to little-known students in Beijing, claimed that Westerners could never understand China and particularly not the Chinese language. When observing that many (though not all) foreigners in China did not speak Chinese, they did not identify this as a sign of imperialist arrogance, as postcolonial scholarship has done. Instead, they traced it back to a perceived Western intellectual inferiority, which contrasted with their own superior ability to learn about the West and its languages. To make this argument, they often turned Orientalist narratives about Chinese mysteriousness against Westerners, to say that China was just too mysterious for the foreigners to understand. This was an extraordinary strategy to create narratives of, however subjectively, perceived

strength, not in spite of, but *out of* Western victimising narratives. This also serves as an intervention into debates that emphasise only the injustices of using English as the main language of communication, be it in a historical, imperialist context or in scholarship about English as a global lingua franca today.

Keywords

China, Chinese language, English language, English as a global lingua franca, inferiority complex, Hu Shi

Introduction

This paper discusses what Chinese intellectuals thought about Westerners' knowledge of the Chinese language and the country more generally in the 1910s, 1920s and early 1930s. It argues that many Chinese intellectuals, ranging from famous scholars like Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Fu Sinian (1896-1950) to little-known students, questioned the ability of Westerners to know Chinese or anything meaningful about the country. They made this assertion about people who possessed very different levels of China knowledge, from sinologists like Arthur Waley (1889-1966) and those who had been born in China, such as the missionary daughter and Nobel Prize winner Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973), to expatriates living in China temporarily, such as missionaries and English-language teachers. One of the intellectuals' central argumentative strategies was the claim that China and its language were mysterious and could therefore simply not be understood by foreigners. With this, they took up a narrative which postcolonial scholarship has identified as part of the 'Orientalism' of the time,¹ and turned it to their advantage to exclude Westerners from intellectual access to China. This claim that Westerners could not understand Chinese and China stood in marked contrast to their claims about their own ability to speak English and understand the West.

This shows that there were limits to the Chinese 'inferiority complex' that is said to have been underlying early 20th-century intellectual discourses.² The 'inferiority complex' describes Chinese intellectuals'

claims that Western culture was superior to the Chinese one. When China was semi-colonized by Western powers in the 19th century, groups of Chinese scholars started advocating the adoption of Western ideas in order to strengthen the country again. The logic behind this was the idea that the secret of Western military and economic power lay partly in Western culture, and that, vice versa, the cause of Chinese weakness was partly to be found in China's culture.

Academic literature has in recent years rarely discussed the 'inferiority complex'. A reason for this is presumably a new focus on the active agency of Chinese intellectuals, which has been fed by Paul Cohen's call for a 'China-centred' approach and postmodernist theories of language contact and translation promoted by scholars like Lydia Liu.³ The study of China at the time has consequently moved on to new topics, such as China's intricate relationship to its own past, its present and Western culture,⁴ the reality of Sino-foreign contacts⁵ and explorations of China's intellectual victimisation,⁶ the latter especially in postcolonial narratives. In fact, the term 'inferiority complex' smacks of the vocabulary created by the first generation of professional China historians of the 1950s,⁷ whose categorizations have largely been overcome. But contrary to some of their other notions (such as the 'Western impact and Chinese response' model⁸), the idea of the 'inferiority complex' has continued to underlie discussions of the period. The fact that it is largely left unmentioned seems to indicate in this case, not that the notion has become obsolete, but that it has come to be taken for granted.

A near consensus also exists about the role of the English language in early 20th-century China. The fact that in Sino-foreign interactions English was spoken more often than Chinese has been interpreted as one of the most vivid expressions of Chinese intellectual victimisation and Western imperialist arrogance. This view has been expressed especially ardently in postcolonial scholarship,⁹ but has also been supported in work of different theoretical outlook.¹⁰ The same interpretation can be found in research about other parts of the formal or informal British Empire.¹¹ This is not even just a matter of historical scholarship. A similar perspective is shared by political theorists who debate the role of English as a global lingua franca in the present and who tend to agree that non-native speakers of English have to

shoulder all sorts of disadvantages, such as the ‘costs’ of learning English, while native speakers are hitching a ‘free ride’.¹²

However, these ‘disadvantage’ and ‘inferiority complex’ narratives ignore a widespread claim from among the voices of the English learners in early 20th-century China: a claim that focuses on the pride in the achievement and ability of the language learners and the perceived inability of the politically stronger. This interpretation was put forward by the Chinese intellectuals discussed in this paper, when they boasted with their knowledge of the West and denied foreigners equivalent China knowledge.

Does this mean that these Chinese intellectuals achieved a position of strength? No. First of all, this does not change the fact that they learnt English more actively than most foreigners learnt Chinese because of imperialist power imbalances, as will be shown in more detail below. Secondly, even their discursive strategies about personal accomplishment were shaped by imperialist structures. In order to make their claims about a Western inability to learn Chinese and about China, they drew upon Orientalist narratives about Chinese mysteriousness, which were themselves created out of an imperialist context. This paper thus does not intend to make the argument that there were no political inequalities – there doubtlessly were and they were unjust. It makes an argument about the limits of the Chinese ‘inferiority complex’. It also makes an argument about the astonishing ability of these intellectuals to take victimising narratives and to turn them around into stories about the abilities and achievements of them as individuals and as members of a nation.

In order to show that this interpretation was held across a large spectrum of intellectuals, this paper discusses a broad range of people, including famous and little-known individuals. Among the famous Chinese nationals are Hu Shi and Fu Sinian, both of them highly influential scholars in their time and renowned for their involvement in the New Culture Movement. They had studied in the US and Europe respectively and were instrumental in spreading Western ideas to Chinese scholarship. This article also discusses the founder of the first socialist party in China, Jiang Kanghu (1883-1954). Jiang also had a Western grounding and was at the time teaching in Canada.¹³ Among the more average intellectuals are

little-known English literature students at the missionary Yanjing University, and at Beijing University and Beijing Normal School. They all studied with the equally little-known American professor of English literature Lewis Nathaniel Chase (1873-1937) between 1921 and 1925.¹⁴

The Westerners discussed in this article come from three of important groups of foreigners in China: colonial administrators, missionaries and educators. Part of the group of educators is Lewis Chase. H. Jocelyn Smyly (1882-1970), an Irish medical missionary to China from 1912 until the 1950s, is not well-known, but was part of an influential group as one of the founding members of the Peking Union Medical College.¹⁵ Famous in his own right is, however, Reginald F. Johnston (1874-1938). He started his career as a colonial administrator and achieved prominence as tutor of the Puyi Emperor (1906-1967). His influence extended when he became professor for Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies in the early 1930s.¹⁶

The period under scrutiny, from the 1910s to the 1930s, is one in which fondness of Western knowledge, though not always of politics, was especially wide-spread in Chinese intellectual circles. The New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s is known for its enthusiasm for Western ideas. Under the impact of anti-imperialist movements in the 1920s, the disillusionment with Europe after World War I and the coming to power of Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) in the late 1920s, the admiration for the West became ever more contested. The 1930s therefore mark the end of the time frame of this paper.

Learning English, learning Chinese

In 1917, one year after his first lecture in Chinese, H. Jocelyn Smyly gave a speech in Chinese at a YMCA meeting. While introducing him to the audience, the YMCA Secretary, a Chinese national, explained that in spite of his long stay in China, Smyly had not had much leisure to practice Chinese. '[T]herefore [the Secretary] requested the audience not to expect too much' of Smyly's language skills.¹⁷ Similarly, Chase's student Zhong Shushen (no dates) explained that foreigners could not at all understand written (that is classical) Chinese. He wrote: '[M]ost of her [China's] good literature are [sic] written in

such a language that the westerners cannot possibly thoroughly understand.’¹⁸ This contrasted with his statement elsewhere in the essay that the Chinese had recently managed to ‘thoroughly understand the west’.¹⁹ Though Zhong did not necessarily count himself among those knowers of the West yet – he was doing an English-language homework, so he was still in the process of learning – he performatively claimed that he was well on his way: the essay was written in English. It was doubtlessly true that educated Chinese knew on average more English and more about the West than the average foreigner in China knew about China and its language, a situation caused by imperialism. Still, there were enough Westerners who did know Chinese and had a knowledge about China, some of them even to an expert level. The following section will outline the opportunities Chinese and Westerners had for learning about each others’ countries and languages.

A. Learning English

In the early 20th century, the Chinese school and university system produced many people with a very good knowledge of aspects of Western scholarship and of one of its dominant languages, English. The import of Western knowledge in the wake of 19th-century imperialism never went uncontested. Self-strengtheners of the 19th century proposed to maintain to Confucian moral values and literary culture as the ‘essence’ (‘ti’), while only importing Western technology as the ‘application’ (yong), known as the ‘tiyong formula’. By the early 20th century, intellectuals had moved on from this. Especially during the New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, they expressed very harsh opinions about ‘Chinese learning’ and China’s past – what earlier on had been described as the ‘essence’ –, even though they never wanted to do away with it completely.²⁰ Debates were now led not about if, but which schools of, Western scholarship should be adopted.²¹

China’s education system too was completely restructured. In 1905, the old civil service examinations were abolished. By the late 1910s, most Chinese students studied ‘Western’ subjects like natural sciences and foreign languages.²² English-language acquisition went back to the 19th century, when Chinese assistants to the compradores in South China had invented Pidgin English.²³ Efforts to learn English were

stepped up after the Opium Wars,²⁴ and by the 1910s and 1920s, Chinese students could learn English at missionary schools, at the English literature departments of renowned institutions like Beijing University²⁵ or through correspondence courses.²⁶

English learners were supported by a mass of textbooks and dictionaries. They were often compiled by Westerners who taught English at Chinese universities. E.A. Zucker (no dates), for example, an assistant professor of English at the Peking Union Medical College,²⁷ published a four-volume textbook called *Western Literature*. It contained text extracts ranging from the *Odyssey* to the Bible and Charles Dickens.²⁸ English became not only an important academic subject, but also a marker of social status. In his novel *Shanghai Express*, Zhang Henshui (1895-1967) mocked Chinese who showed off with their English at every occasion, even if, or rather particularly if, their mastery of the language was rather tenuous.²⁹ English and other European languages became quite ubiquitous in otherwise Chinese-language writings of pro-Western intellectuals of the time. Journals like *New Tide* did not only have official English translations for their titles (in this case ‘The Renaissance’). Their articles were also full of English expressions.³⁰ In their private correspondence, students mixed English expressions into an otherwise Chinese text.³¹ Even the abdicated Chinese Puyi Emperor had an English-language tutor in Reginald F. Johnston. In sum, in China’s metropolises, interest in the English language was vibrant.

B. Learning Chinese

Western interest in China never reached the levels of Chinese interest in the West, arguably because in imperialist times the politically strong West felt no need to take cultural lessons from China. Even among the foreigners living in China, there were those who got by without much knowledge of the Chinese language and China,³² and who contented themselves with speaking Pidgin English.³³ According to some, Robert Bickers points out, learning Chinese was even considered ‘dangerous’, because this form of ‘going native’ was believed to disrupt the cohesion of the British in China.³⁴ This attitude has rightly been interpreted as a manifestation of imperialist arrogance.³⁵ But there was also the other end of the spectrum with people who spoke Chinese almost like a native language. The most famous, but by no means the

only one, was Pearl S. Buck, the winner of the 1938 Nobel Prize in literature. These were often children of missionaries who had, like Buck, been born in China.³⁶

Between these two extremes, there was a middle field of people who had come to China as adults and who sought to learn Chinese with varying degrees of intensity and success. One of them was Reginal F. Johnston, the English tutor of the Puyi Emperor. When Johnston came to Hong Kong in 1898 to work in the colonial service, he had to learn Cantonese and later Mandarin.³⁷ According to Johnston's own assessment, he was able to talk about European politics in Chinese with the emperor,³⁸ he could translate texts from classical Chinese into English,³⁹ and discuss the deeper cultural meaning of Chinese concepts, such as social position of a 'teacher' in China.⁴⁰ Classical Chinese was for many centuries China's written language, comparable to Latin in medieval Europe. It was based on the language of the Confucian Classics, came in a variety of styles, but differed in grammar and vocabulary from the spoken dialects. As the language of the elite, it possessed high cultural prestige. However, in the 1910s and 1920s, its position was just being challenged under the auspices of the New Culture Movement by proponents of *baihua*, literally the 'plain language'. This was a style based on the vernacular but imbued with Western loanwords. Classical Chinese was considered to be especially difficult for foreigners to learn.⁴¹ Still, Johnston claimed to possess knowledge of classical Chinese. Among sinologists, there too were those who could read it, most famously James Legge (1815-1897), the translator of the Confucian Classics,⁴² or Arthur Waley, the translator of the Opium War diaries of the Chinese Governor-General Lin Zexu's (1785-1850).⁴³

Skills in spoken Chinese were needed by missionaries. Without the knowledge of their local dialect, they would not have been able to preach the gospel with any success. The medical missionary H. Jocelyn Smyly started learning Chinese very soon after his arrival,⁴⁴ and a few years later he could give speeches in the language.⁴⁵ Others, who did not depend on Chinese-language skills for their work, but who were still interested in the country, dabbled in Chinese without all too much commitment and success. The American English-language professor Lewis Chase, for example, studied Chinese for one year before

giving up.⁴⁶ As can be judged from his language learning materials, he never reached a very high level of language competence. His textbooks consisted of relatively simple dialogues.⁴⁷ The only Chinese character to be found in handwriting in his papers is ‘chai’ – the character he was using to transcribe his surname into Chinese.⁴⁸ In short, among foreigners in China and those based in the West with an interest in China (like the sinologists), there was a huge spectrum of Chinese-language skills, ranging from virtual native speakers like Buck, over people with good and mediocre skills, to those who considered learning Chinese dangerous.

The Chinese-language learning industry was not as vibrant as the trade with English teaching. But it was quite well-developed too. Foreigners like Smyly and Chase went to language schools and they additionally hired private teachers to help them with their studies.⁴⁹ Textbooks, or grammars, of Chinese went back to the 17th century,⁵⁰ and the style they taught depended on their target audience. Works directed at employees of the Customs Service, for example, were taught to compose official documents in classical Chinese.⁵¹ Textbooks for missionaries included spoken dialects, such as Joseph Henri de Prémare’s (1666-1736) Latin-Chinese book.⁵² When Chase and Smyly decided to learn Chinese in the 1910s and 1920s, after ‘plain language’ had been popularised through the New Culture Movement, they could choose from a considerable selection of works exclusively focused on ‘simple’⁵³ and colloquial Chinese. Very often these books taught easy dialogues and phrases, Chinese characters, and sometimes, though not always, the tones of the Chinese language.⁵⁴

As with Chinese-language skills, there was a broad spectrum of Western knowledge about China. It is difficult to say what ‘knowledge about China’ is, as it could include anything from academic knowledge, to an understanding of everyday life, politics and social customs. But even with such a loose definition, it is possible to say that there were those who were relatively withdrawn in most aspects of ‘knowledge about China’, and those who actively sought to expand their experiences.

Treaty-port settlers in the interwar period as described by Bickers gained their knowledge about China, before arriving there, from works like Sax Rohmer’s (1883-1959) notorious *Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu* of

1913.⁵⁵ Once in China, some of the expatriates remained in a treaty-port setting without gaining much experience of the outside world.⁵⁶ Others delved into Chinese social life by socializing with their Chinese peers⁵⁷ or working in a Chinese environment, such as Johnston. Some people, like Lewis Chase, read (English-language) newspaper articles written by Chinese nationals.⁵⁸ Other platforms through which foreigners like Chase could learn about China were associations like the Society of Friends of Literature. Founded in 1919 and run by people including Hu Shi and Johnston,⁵⁹ this Society organized lectures in English given by Chinese or Western speakers on topics either related to China or to the West. Among such lectures was a speech by Hu Shi on ‘The Philosophy of Tai Cheng [Dai Zheng]’, or by J. C. Ferguson (no date) on ‘The Republic of China’.⁶⁰

For those who were interested in China more formally, it was possible to study sinology, an academic discipline that had developed since the 19th century. In its early days, sinologists were very often ‘old China hands’ (that is, retired colonial administrators, missionaries, and so forth), a trend that was only just being overcome in the early 20th century.⁶¹ With Johnston, the School of Oriental Studies (today SOAS) in London hired just such an ‘old China hand’ in the early 1930s as professor for Chinese.⁶² Another sinologist of this generation was Arthur Waley, who had never actually been to China (or Japan), who did not speak modern Chinese or Japanese, but still translated many works from classical Chinese and Japanese into English.⁶³ Paul Cohen has described this time all the way up to the end of World War II as ‘the amateur phase’ of, in Cohen’s case, sinology in the US.⁶⁴

In other words, there were various ways for Westerners to learn Chinese and about China. But whether Westerners made use of them, was up to them and to their particular line of work. That this optionality of learning about China and its language was the result of the political power structures of imperialism is a fact that does not need much arguing for.

The unknowability of Chinese

Even though there were foreigners in China who spoke Chinese and who learnt about China, Chinese nationals, ranging from Smyly's acquaintance (the above-cited YMCA secretary) and Chase's students to, as will be shown below, famous scholars like Hu Shi, Fu Sinian and Jiang Kanghu, claimed that foreigners just could not understand Chinese. Contrary to what one might expect in light of the causes that led to this imbalance of knowledge – namely, imperialism and China's political weakness – they did not usually frame this as a symptom of Western imperialist arrogance. Instead, they traced this to a general Western inability to understand the language.

In their homework essays, Lewis Chase's students had the opportunity to expand in quite some detail on the Western intellectual insufficiency, which makes their essays interesting case studies for the discursive strategies they were employing. Zhong Shushen made the aforementioned statement that 'westerners cannot possibly thoroughly understand' Chinese literature in the context of explaining why so few Westerners read Chinese poetry and fiction.⁶⁵ The 1920s saw the rise of the notion of 'world literature', and in the Chinese interpretation at the time, this meant that every country contributed its bit to world literature – China included.⁶⁶ From a historian's perspective today, the imperialist Western-centredness of the time was to blame for the fact that far more Chinese intellectuals read Western literature than the other way around. But Zhong held the Western inability to read Chinese, especially classical Chinese, responsible. 'Most westerners cannot appreciate the beauty of Chinese literature simply because they cannot understand the language. It is entirely due to their own fault.'⁶⁷ With this, Zhong defended Chinese literature against the suspicion that it might not be as good as Western literature. In other words, he refused to participate in the 'inferiority complex': Chinese classical works were as good as Western literature.⁶⁸ The only difference was that the Chinese had recently managed to 'thoroughly understand the west', so they could appreciate these works.⁶⁹ If the foreigners wanted to enjoy Chinese literature, they should simply try to do the same.

Postcolonial scholarship has argued that it was a popular Orientalist theme to describe the ‘East’ or China as the ‘mysterious’ and ‘inscrutable’.⁷⁰ In an act of ‘auto-Orientalism’,⁷¹ Zhong Shushen’s classmate Liu Gang (1897-1979) tapped into this Orientalist discourse and turned it upside down to put himself into a position of strength: ‘China has her peculiar idiom and peculiar way of saying things.’ Liu said. ‘One who does not know such things can never get any understanding and pleasure from Chinese literature in originals or in translations.’⁷² Liu Gang transformed the Orientalist mystique into a narrative of Chinese exceptionalism. There is no indication that this was a conscious strategy. But it is possible that he picked up Orientalist narratives of China’s mysteriousness from his teacher Chase, who, as will be shown below, subscribed in part to this idea. Liu then mixed this ‘auto-Orientalism’ with the theory about the untranslatability of languages. In the original, Liu explained, Chinese literature was ‘as beautiful as young girls’. But once translated, they were ‘no less disgusting than the skeleton of the dead’. The reason was that their ‘beauties ... are intrans[la]table to any other language’.⁷³

Liu Gang was not alone with this assessment. Zhong Shushen agreed.⁷⁴ And so did their colleague at Yanjing University Ling Ruitang (no dates), who stated in a letter to Chase that many translations of the classical work *Book of Poetry* ‘are just making the Chinese scholar sick’.⁷⁵ She herself, on the other hand, felt that she was quite able to produce good translations. She continued the letter offering to Chase to translate into English, not the *Book of Poetry*, but a play she had written herself.⁷⁶

Liu, Zhong and Ling had not invented the untranslatability theory. Edward Sapir (1884-1939) was developing this idea in the 1920s and 1930s, and it had been anticipated even earlier, in the 18th century. It was also well-known in China. In the 1900s, the famous scholar Zhang Binglin (1869-1936) had endorsed it.⁷⁷ But for Ling Ruitang, untranslatability only applied to Chinese-English translations, not to translations from foreign languages into Chinese. And it tended to be the foreigners who made the bad translations. In her view, Chinese intellectuals were not excluded from participating in Western discourses and languages, but foreigners were excluded from knowing Chinese. Auto-Orientalism was

combined with untranslatability theories to explain that Westerners were unable to understand Chinese and its literature.

Chase's students were not alone in their scepticism about Western understanding of the Chinese language. Fu Sinian, for example, looked askance at the Chinese name of a (Chinese) friend's French acquaintance called 'Mlle Jemmes'. 'Mlle Jemmes's' Chinese name is not revealed in Fu's letter. He only commented: 'Mlle Jemmes's Chinese name is very vulgar. I do not know whose great work this is.'⁷⁸ One of the main voices about China in the West at the time was Pearl S. Buck, who had created for herself a public persona that claimed to be more Chinese than American.⁷⁹ It was probably hard to doubt Buck's spoken Chinese. But this did not exempt her from the criticism about her classical Chinese. In 1932, Jiang Kanghu had news that Buck was about to publish her translation of the Chinese classical novel *Water Margins*. Jiang did not have very high expectations for this book. He cited her translation of this book's title in *The Good Earth* as '*Bandits of the Shwei Lake*', and he vehemently took exception to this rendition. 'As long as a Westerner cannot himself or herself read Chinese texts and as long as he or she depends chiefly on Chinese coolies and amahs as the source of information and as first-hand translators, there is little hope left for him or her to really understand and truly interpret China, even though he or she be born and live always in China', he concluded.⁸⁰

It would appear that, in Jiang Kanghu's view, suitable English translations of Chinese works could only be done when foreigners collaborated with Chinese scholars. This at least is implied by the publication of his own translation of (classical Chinese) Tang poems, which had been completed in collaboration with the American poet Witter Bynner (1881-1968). The book was called *The Jade Mountain*, published in 1929.⁸¹ Jiang and Bynner had met in 1918 in Berkeley and worked on the translation for over a decade.⁸² From their sparse comments in the book, it appears that Jiang Kanghu provided a literal translation and Bynner transformed it into poetic English.⁸³ Bynner initially did not speak any Chinese. Although over the course of the collaboration he learned a bit of spoken Chinese,⁸⁴ he would have been dependent on Jiang's translation of the classical Chinese of the poems. Bynner himself made it clear that, at all stages of

the process, Jiang Kanghu shaped the translations. He explained that he and Bynner ‘discussed’ the poems intensely before settling on a translation. Bynner also assured his readers that he had Jiang’s ‘sanction’ when translating unfamiliar place names with words such as “southern” or “eastern”.⁸⁵ Only when done in collaboration with someone who was both Chinese and a scholar, *The Jade Mountain* suggests, good translations from Chinese into English were possible, in Jiang Kanghu’s view.

The unknowability of China

Jiang Kanghu’s comments on Pearl S. Buck show that Chinese intellectuals did not only deny that Westerners could properly speak and read Chinese. They expanded this claim to state that they could not really understand China either, and for this too they often drew upon strategies of ‘auto-Orientalism’.

Buck often faced criticism about the way she described Chinese customs, and about the types of social groups she described. According to Julia Lovell, one problem was that Buck often wrote about the countryside, at a time when ‘[t]he peasant masses had become an abstract political category (...) defined as possessing specific (anti-imperialist, antifeudalist, revolutionary) forms of consciousness’.⁸⁶ Buck’s peasants usually did not conform to this ideal. Hu Shi read Buck’s *The Good Earth* on his trip to Canada and the United States in 1933. He had not even wanted to read it. But during a stop in Hawaii, an American acquaintance suggested that he do so, since people in America would definitely want to hear his opinion on Buck’s work.⁸⁷ After reading it, Hu Shi’s assessment was that ‘this book is really not very good’, and he found a lot of mistakes in Buck’s description of rural China.⁸⁸ Others were more direct. Lovell cites the famous novelist Lu Xun (1881-1936) writing about Buck in 1933: ‘It is always best that Chinese people write about matters Chinese, that is the only way to see the truth.’⁸⁹ China was just not comprehensible for foreigners, according to this view.

Buck’s work was not the only occasion on which Chinese intellectuals expressed their scepticism about Westerners’ knowledge. While on a visit to the United Kingdom in 1926, Hu Shi repeatedly met the sinologist Arthur Waley. But while he described him as ‘really lovely’,⁹⁰ he had a less than stellar opinion

of Waley's scholarship on both China and Japan. Waley gave Hu his book *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art*. He commented on it in his diary with the words: 'In [this book], a lot follows old theories and there are very many mistakes.'⁹¹ One of his more positive comments on Waley was still very sceptical. When Waley gave him a copy of a book by the Tang Dynasty author Zhang Wencheng (658-730), Waley also told Hu that Zhang Wencheng was mentioned in the historiographical work *Book of the Tang*. 'I should check this', was the most Hu Shi was prepared to concede.⁹²

Not only high-brow intellectuals held this view. Chase's student Ling Ruitang had an equally low opinion of the work of Emma Service Lester (1883-?). Lester was a missionary who lived in China for ten years and who had written her Master's thesis at Columbia University on Chinese poetry.⁹³ Ling explained to Chase that Lester's work contained many mistakes and she offered to help her correct them.⁹⁴ Westerners, Ling Ruitang concluded, should keep their hands off the complicated literature and follow the example of Isaac Taylor Headland (1859-1942), who had written the book *The Chinese Boy and Girl*.⁹⁵ This was a book on Chinese nursery songs that contained deep observations such as 'it is a mistake to suppose that any one nation or people has exclusive right to Mother Goose. She is an omnipresent old lady. She is Asiatic as well as European or American.'⁹⁶ Ling felt that this was the sort of topic Westerners should tackle.

Westerners' views on their China ignorance

Criticizing Emma Lester's work in front of Lewis Chase may not have been among Ling's most diplomatic actions – Lester was the future Mrs. Emma Lester Chase. How then did these Chinese claims about Western intellectual incompetence affect the Westerners who were personally confronted with them? The answer is that these Westerners dealt with them in an inherently contradictory way: they both expressed agreement with them and ignored them.

In 1905, the chaplain in the British army E.J. Hardy (1849-1920) published a book with the rather Orientalist title *John Chinaman at Home*. His book was a 335-pages long volume on what Hardy

described as Chinese everyday customs. While the very act of publishing such a book claims a certain knowledge of China, Hardy explained in the introduction that he, and in fact any other Western foreigner, could just not understand China and its language. 'To master the Chinese language thoroughly would require "a head of oak, lungs of brass, nerves of steel, a constitution of iron, the patience of Job, and the lifetime of Methuselah."' ⁹⁷ Lewis Chase did the same. When back in the United States, he gave public lectures with the title 'My Ignorance of China'. ⁹⁸ He started out by explaining that China was impossible to comprehend and the Chinese language was impossible to learn. He did not have 'a supply of more than five minutes['] worth of knowledge' about China, he said, and then went on to give a half-hour lecture on the country. ⁹⁹

Similarly, when confronted with the YMCA Secretary's judgement that his Chinese was not good, Smyly wrote to his mother that the Secretary was probably right. ¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, on other occasions he was very much aware of the advantage his language skills gave him in China's medical establishment. He was also very keen on serving in the First World War as one of Britain's officers who could speak Chinese and command the Chinese coolies who were working for Britain. ¹⁰¹ Others, like Reginald F. Johnston, had found a less complicated way to deal with the issue. Johnston claimed a lot of insider knowledge of China for himself. But he negated it for most other foreigners, especially for journalists. For example, with his help, the emperor had chosen 'Henry' as his English name. Journalists had soon started referring to the Puyi Emperor as 'Henry P'u-Yi'. Johnston deemed this 'not only unpleasant to eye and ear but [it] is at least as incorrect as the absurd designation 'Mr. P'u''. ¹⁰²

These (with the exception of Johnston) self-contradictory statements make sense of the tension between two tropes that have been identified as 'Orientalist' by postcolonial studies. On the one hand, there were the 'Orientalist' assertions to 'know the Oriental'. ¹⁰³ On the other hand, postcolonial writers have pointed to the West's assessment of the 'Orient', or here China, as 'inscrutable'. ¹⁰⁴ While these two ideas are mutually contradictory, they were indeed both put forward by Westerners at the time, often even by the same individual.

Conclusion

The Chinese intellectuals discussed in this paper took these Orientalist narratives about China's mysteriousness and turned them into stories about the ability and achievement of themselves as individuals and as members of the Chinese nation, and, vice versa, as signs of the intellectual incompetence of the Westerners. Through this subversive strategy, they put a limit to the 'inferiority complex' by which they were otherwise plagued.

This of course did not change the realities of their victimisation. They adopted the West's Orientalist intellectual structures when making these claims through auto-Orientalism, and to some extent this exposed their actual political weakness. Sometimes their claims also sounded somewhat defensive, for example in the case of Zhong Shushen's arguments about China's rightful place in 'world literature'. It also needs to be noted that this was a discourse among highly privileged intellectuals, who had ample access to education. It is unsurprising that this group of people would choose China's literary culture as being inaccessible to the Westerners. This culture had for centuries been this group's source of cultural capital, as it was tested in the civil service examinations. Even though by that time the examination system had been abolished, pride in this literature and in classical Chinese still shone through in this post-examination generation. China's literary culture appears to have been treated as the last bastion of this group's claim to exclusiveness.

This paper thus does not mean to say that there was no imperialist suppression. Instead, it argues that these Chinese intellectuals created stories of subjectively perceived strength, not in spite of, but *out of* Western victimising narratives. This suggests that, in assessing the role of English in other colonies at the time or even in its role as global lingua franca in the present, the voices of the English learners themselves need to be heard, as they may tell other stories, in addition to those about victimisation and disadvantage.

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¹ Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 293; Leong, *The China Mystique*, 25.

² Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, 584; Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 156;
Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 120; Gu, *Sinologism*, 37.

³ Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 6; Liu, *Translingual Practice*.

⁴ Luo, 'Xin wenhua yundong shiqi guanyu zhengli guogu de sixiang lunzheng'; Ye and Zhang,
'Xiandaixing shiye zhong de "guocui pai" he "Xueheng pai"'; Jenco, 'Culture as History'.

⁵ Wasserstrom, 'Cosmopolitan Connections and Transnational Networks'; Bickers, *Britain in China*.

⁶ Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*.

⁷ Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 216.

¹⁰ Adamson, *China's English*, 2004, 1–2; Hevia, *English Lessons*, 2–3.

¹¹ Heath, *Purifying Empire*, 78; Talib, *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures*, 7–9. This observation is
of course not confined to British colonies, but is equally applicable to the colonies of any other country.

¹² Van Parijs, *Linguistic Justice for Europe and the World*; Réaume, 'Lingua Franca Fever'.

¹³ Boorman, 'Chiang K'ang-Hu', 338, 343.

¹⁴ Chase, 'Curriculum Vitae', 1.

¹⁵ Smyly Jr., 'Missionary Life in China - Talk for the Christchurch Ladies Luncheon Group Hong Kong',
8; Smyly Jr., 'Letter to the Author'; Smyly Jr., 'Talk to the Corona Society no. 2', 20–21.

- ¹⁶ Airlie, *Scottish Mandarin*, 20–30, 227.
- ¹⁷ Smyly, ‘H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eleanor Smyly’, 29 May 1917, 2. I would like to thank William J. Smyly for his permission to cite this sentence from his father’s unpublished letter.
- ¹⁸ Zhong, ‘China’s Representation on the Literary Map of the World’, 2–3.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 3.
- ²⁰ Luo, ‘Xin wenhua yundong shiqi guanyu zhengli guogu de sixiang lunzheng’, 225.
- ²¹ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 248; Ye and Zhang, ‘Xiandaixing shiye zhong de “guocui pai” he “Xueheng pai”’, 3.
- ²² Yeh, *The Alienated Academy*, 10–12, 17.
- ²³ Feng, *English Language Education across Greater China*, 24; Adamson, ‘China’s English’, 2015, 120.
- ²⁴ Adamson, *China’s English*, 2004, 25.
- ²⁵ ‘Liu Gang chengji biao’.
- ²⁶ Wang, ‘Huang Dinghui’, 294.
- ²⁷ Zucker, *Western Literature*, 1927, 1:ii.
- ²⁸ Zucker, *Western Literature*, 1926.
- ²⁹ Zhang, *Shanghai Express*, 17.
- ³⁰ For example, Luo, ‘Shenme shi wenxue?’
- ³¹ Fu, ‘Zhi Luo Jialun’, 33.
- ³² Bickers, *Britain in China*, 76–78, 87–88.
- ³³ Smyly Jr., ‘Foreign Compounds in China (Notes by William J. Smyly Jr. Accompanying a Letter from H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eileen Smyly of 9 May 1923)’, 1.
- ³⁴ Bickers, *Britain in China*, 87–88.
- ³⁵ Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 216.
- ³⁶ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 18.
- ³⁷ Airlie, *Scottish Mandarin*, 22, 36.

- ³⁸ Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, 1934, 232–233.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 146–159.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 180–185.
- ⁴¹ W. H. C., ‘Study of Chinese’, 789.
- ⁴² Legge, *The Chinese Classics*.
- ⁴³ Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes*.
- ⁴⁴ Smyly, *H. Jocelyn Smyly to William J. Smyly (sen.)*, 4.
- ⁴⁵ Smyly, ‘H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eleanor Smyly’, 24 Aug. 1916, 2.
- ⁴⁶ Chase, ‘My Ignorance of China’, 6.
- ⁴⁷ Chase and et al., ‘Huan qian’.
- ⁴⁸ Chase and et al., ‘Shanxi Zhaocheng xian ...’, 2.
- ⁴⁹ Smyly, ‘H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eleanor Smyly’, 23 Sep. 1914, 3–4; Bell, ‘Eileen Bell to H. Jocelyn Smyly’, editorial comments by Wiliam Smyly, page 2 of transcript.
- ⁵⁰ Harbsmeier, *Science and Civilization in China*, 7a:15.
- ⁵¹ Hirth, *Textbook of Modern Documentary Chinese*, 1909, Text:3; Hirth, *Textbook of Modern Documentary Chinese*, 1910, Key:44.
- ⁵² Prémare, *Notitia linguae sinicae*. Prémare’s book was only published almost a hundred years after his death, in 1831 Harbsmeier, *Science and Civilization in China*, 7a:16.
- ⁵³ Castle, *Chinese Documentary Drafts*, 1.
- ⁵⁴ Ratay, *Current Chinese: Translation*, 127–295; Castle, *Chinese Documentary Drafts*, 36–61.
- ⁵⁵ Bickers, *Britain in China*, 33–43.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 87–88; Hardy, *John Chinaman at Home*, 9.
- ⁵⁷ Wasserstrom, ‘Cosmopolitan Connections and Transnational Networks’.
- ⁵⁸ Zhu, ‘Family Life in China (1)’.
- ⁵⁹ Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, 2011, 275; Hu, *Hu Shi de riji*, 1:65.

- ⁶⁰ Wenyou hui, 'Invitation to Hu Shi's Lecture'; Wenyou hui, 'Invitation to J. C. Ferguson's Lecture'.
- ⁶¹ Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, xv.
- ⁶² Airlie, *Scottish Mandarin*, 227.
- ⁶³ Honey, *Incense at the Altar*, 225–227.
- ⁶⁴ Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 2.
- ⁶⁵ Zhong, 'China's Representation on the Literary Map of the World', 2–3.
- ⁶⁶ McDougall, 'The Impact of Western Literary Trends', 45–46.
- ⁶⁷ Zhong, 'China's Representation on the Literary Map of the World', 4.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ⁷⁰ Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 293; Leong, *The China Mystique*, 25.
- ⁷¹ Alatas, 'The Meaning of Alternative Discourses', 70–71.
- ⁷² Liu, 'China's Representation on the Literary Map of the World', 1–2. I would like to thank Liu's descendant Liu Qian for her permission to cite from Liu Gang's manuscripts.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁷⁴ Zhong, 'China's Representation on the Literary Map of the World', 1.
- ⁷⁵ Ling, 'Ling Ruitang to Lewis Chase', 2 Jan. 1924, 1.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁷ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 245.
- ⁷⁸ Fu, 'Zhi Luo Jialun', 34.
- ⁷⁹ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 24.
- ⁸⁰ Jiang, 'A Chinese Scholar's Looks at Pearl S. Buck's Novels', 10.
- ⁸¹ Bynner and Jiang, *The Jade Mountain*.
- ⁸² Quartermain and Tayler, 'Witter Bynner', 17.

- ⁸³ Bynner and Jiang, *The Jade Mountain*, 278. The inner cover page of the book also states that it was 'translated by Witter Bynner from the texts of Kiang Kang-hu', *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁸⁴ Quartermain and Tayler, 'Witter Bynner', 18.
- ⁸⁵ Bynner, 'Poetry and Culture', xviii.
- ⁸⁶ Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital*, 93.
- ⁸⁷ Hu, *Hu Shi riji quanji*, 2004, 6:711–712.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:712.
- ⁸⁹ Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital*, 92.
- ⁹⁰ Hu, *Hu Shi riji quanji*, 2004, 4:344.
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:475.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*
- ⁹³ Lester, 'Emma Lester to Reed Smith', 1; 'Pictures of Staff'; 'Passport of Emma Service Lester'.
- ⁹⁴ Ling, 'Ling Ruitang to Lewis Chase', 192?, 1.
- ⁹⁵ Ling, 'Ling Ruitang to Lewis Chase', 192?, 2.
- ⁹⁶ Headland, *The Chinese Boy and Girl*, 9.
- ⁹⁷ Hardy, *John Chinaman at Home*, 10. This was the third edition. The first edition dated to 1905. On Hardy being a chaplain, see inner cover page.
- ⁹⁸ Chase, 'My Ignorance of China', 1.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹⁰⁰ Smyly, 'H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eleanor Smyly', 29 May 1917, 2.
- ¹⁰¹ Smyly, 'H. Jocelyn Smyly to Eleanor Smyly', 6 Sep. 1917, 1, 5–6.
- ¹⁰² Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, 1934, 232.
- ¹⁰³ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 27; Said, *Orientalism*, 31.
- ¹⁰⁴ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 25; Shih, *The Lure of the Modern*, 293.