Orientalism and History

Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, despite and perhaps because of its controversial and polemical nature, has achieved its own authoritative status in today's academia. Many historians of "the Orient" have adopted concepts and views expressed in *Orientalism* in their own works. As such, I remember the first time I read the book, expecting to find this overarching theory that was applicable to my field of Chinese history. As Said himself has admitted and a critic has pointed out, however, the scope of *Orientalism* is "nothing like as extensive as its title suggests."[1] Said focuses mainly on the Anglo-French Orientalism in the Middle East starting from the last third of the eighteenth century. His argument did not seem to apply to other so-called "Third World" regions that had been affected by Western colonialism. As a result, I found myself disappointed the first time. Now, I seek to answer the same question that I asked myself three years ago, but with a very different answer: What were the appeals of this book that gave it its staying power?

This time, I have found it useful to distinguish the questions that Said raises and Said's overall argument in *Orientalism*. After one makes such a distinction, it becomes easier to read the work in a more constructive way that broadens one's historical methodologies and perspectives. As many critics have pointed out, Said's overall argument is less than satisfactory from its beginning, development, and conclusion. The first main problem I see is Said's act of delimitation. Said focuses on the modern British-French-American Orientalism in the Islamic Middle East, which starts roughly from Napoleon's Egyptian expedition of 1798. He contends that Britain and France were not only pioneers of Oriental studies but also were two greatest colonial powers before twentieth century. America, on the other hand, has replaced the void of

[1] C. F. Beckingham, "Review: *Orientalism*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 42. 3 (1979), 562

those two starting from the World War II (17). The focus on the Middle East is influenced very much by Said's personality. Said himself admits that for him the Islamic Middle East had to be center of attention because of his personal experience as an "Oriental" growing up in two British colonies and living in America. At this point, I did not have much problem with Said's delimitation. After all, as Said himself says, every work has to start with the same act of delimitation. We as historians have to decide on the scope and relevant sources of a project before we embark on our actual research; it is a starting point of any academic project. After reading various reviews of the work, however, I began to see the problem.

For example, Said explains that the lack of Germany's national interest in the Orient prevented the lack of a close partnership between German Orientalism and colonialism and thus he will not include German Orientalism in his study (17-19). As a number of critics have pointed out, however, German Orientalism was as influential as French-British Orientalism.[2] Here one can see how Said's exclusion of German Orientalism actually preconditions and directs his study of Orientalism. He *knows* that German Orientalism does not look like his idea of Orientalism, and therefore he excludes it from his list. It almost resembles his examination of premises and logic in Balfour's speech on Egypt, where he states: "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows; . . . England confirms that by occupying Egypt; . . . Egypt requires, indeed insists upon British occupation" (34). Said knows Orientalism; Orientalism is what Said knows; German Orientalism is not the Orientalism that Said knows; Said confirms that by excluding German Orientalism from his study, which in turn shows Orientalism as what Said knows. His entire argument depends on his act of *starting*.

[2] Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory*, 34. 3 (Oct. 1995), 202 and Albert Hourani, "The Road to Morocco," *New York Review of Books* (March 8, 1979), 30.

Along the same line, even influential British and French Orientalists who had much sympathy toward "the Orient" and their works are excluded in Said's study.[3] Said has a preconceived idea of Orientalism, and he narrows down his scope so that he will work with sources that will fit his idea. One cannot help but suspect that Said's preconception is at work even within these sources. This might sound like a bit of a stretch, but now Said's exclusion of regions outside the Islamic Middle East does not seem so innocent anymore. For example, James Clifford argues that the omission of the Maghreb is significant because Said's criticism of Orientalism would be untenable considering that Said's critical questions have already been voiced by modern French Orientalists ever since the Algerian War.[4] Thomas Trautmann, on a similar note, has shown in his book that the Saidian model of Orientalism, with all its "fuzziness," is not very applicable to the British Orientalism in India. I know from my studies that Saidian concept of Orientalism falters in East Asia as well, considering the long-standing tradition of Sinocentrism in imperial China and the case of the more recent Empire of Japan. This problem was refreshing to me in a way, because it made me ask several questions about methodology. What does Said's example tell me about my own act of delimitation in deciding the scope of the work and selecting sources used for my research? How much of my starting point informs my understanding of the sources and direct my development of argument? What can I do to be more or less free from theoretical predilection in the course of my research, from the beginning to the end?

[3] For example, Beckingham notes: "Besides, some of the Orientalists who have written most sympathetically and appreciatively of Islam, Islamic peoples and Islamic literature are ignored in this book. There is no reference to E. J. W. Gibbs; Browne and Nicholson are mentioned once only and quite incidentally; Sir Thomas Arnold is included in the same list but nothing whatever is said about *The Preaching of Islam*, which did so much to discredit one of the most prevalent misconceptions" (562).
[4] James Clifford, "Review: *Orientalism*," *History and Theory* 19.2 (Feb. 1980), 215.

The second major problem I see with Said's argument is the degree of generalization that he has used on Orientalism and Orientalists. Many critics have pointed out how Said commits the same sin that he accuses Orientalists of in totally decharacterizing Orientalists and taking any relevant type of agency away from them. C. Ernest Dawn noted that Orientalism as a field is not as homogeneous as Said believes.[5] Malcolm H. Kerr accused Said of caricaturing Orientalists the way Orientalists supposedly caricatured "Orientals."[6] I myself had a hard time imagining any field being so homogeneous to be utterly devoid of individuality. Indeed, to use Said's language, an Orientalist is first an Orientalist, second a scholar, third, an Orientalist. The category of "Orientalist" totally decharacterizes an individual Orientalist. For me, this topic raised a few interesting questions about the usefulness and intrinsic difficulties of generalization and categorization. Said defines Orientalism in three dimensions, as an academic discipline, as a style of thought based on binary distinction between "the Occident" and "the Orient," and the corporate institution that deals with the Orient (2-3). The problem arises when he does not make a clear distinction and makes inconsistent use of his definition throughout his book. His insistence on designating all three dimensions simply as Orientalism and thus his "fuzziness" is attacked by Trautmann. Trautmann argues that Orientalism as an academic discipline and Orientalism as the corporate institution must be distinguished, and he designates each Orientalism1 and Orientalism2, respectively (25, 189). Trautmann's categorization of Orientalism is definitely less general than Said's, and he shows more concern for individuals in terms of situating and contextualization. In that sense, it is ironic to see Trautmann generalize a great deal about the role of Evangelicals on the rise of Indophobia. The value of generalization and categorization cannot be ignored, as a historian could not study much if he or she were to

[5] C. Ernest Dawn, "Review: *Orientalism*," *The American Historical Review*, 84. 5 (Dec., 1979), 1334.
[6] Malcolm H. Kerr, "Review: *Orientalism*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980), 546-547.

deconstruct everything. Then what is the line between generalization (that is more or less acceptable) and overgeneralization? Does looking at the exceptions overly narrows the scope of a work and result in over-representation of the exceptions? What is the right dose of generalizing and categorizing in a historical work? These are questions that I probably will struggle to answer for a very long time, but thinking about these questions has helped me be more aware of the problem; there is a value in itself.

The third major problem of the argument of *Orientalism* is Said's denial of agency on the part of the Orientals and thus his assumption of unidirectional flow of Foucauldian power-knowledge in Orientalism. Said says: "It does not occur to Balfour, however, to let the Egyptian speak for himself" (33). Well, it does not occur to Said to let the Oriental speak for himself either. Said would defend himself by saying that he is dealing with Western conception of "the Orient," not the real Islam or "the Orient." I, however, find it hard to believe that very Western conception could have been totally independent of the opinions of the "Orientals" themselves. Trautmann makes a good point when he argues that the flow of knowledge between British Orientalists and Brahmin pundits was two-directional, although it was on unequal terms.

There is also a problem of reception of an idea. How have "Orientals" conceived Orientalism? One simply gets no sense of that question in Said's work. I might refer to two cases of East Asian reception of Orientalism. One case concerns China's reception of Orientalism that Yang Congrong and Arif Dirlik call "the Orientalism of the Orientals."[7] Dirlik convincingly traces the Orientalist influence on the conception of Chinese self-image in the early twentieth century and demonstrates how Chinese nationalism has become an instance of self-

[7] Yang Congrong, "Dongfang shehuide dongfanglun" (The Orientalism of Oriental Societies), *Dangdai* 64 (August 1, 1991), 38-53 and Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," *History and Theory* 35.4 (Dec. 1996), 96-118.

Orientalization.[8] Indeed, much of today's Chinese nationalistic historiography depends on the self-Orientalization of the Chinese past. It is advantageous for pre-modern China to be remembered as a helpless victim of the all-powerful, colonialist West, as that kind of perspective gives China a moral superiority vis-à-vis the West. Here we see a deliberate use of Orientalism by the "Orientals" to attack the representation of the West in the language of Orientalist tradition, where preconceived virtues of the West are turned into a weapon to attack the West. Even more telling would be the case of Meiji Japan. It is well known that Japan tried to strengthen itself by learning from the West selectively. Translation of Western books and studying abroad in an attempt to learn the West were of paramount concern to the Meiji oligarchs.[9] Indeed, Meiji Japan's study of the West contradicts Said's picture of unidirectional flow of knowledge from the West to "the Orient."

Do such limitations of the book deny it its value? I do not think so. I have found it disappointing that criticisms of "Orientalists" on *Orientalism* were overly focused on the flaws of Said's argument and defending the integrity of "Orientalism." It is not enough to say that Said's thesis is untenable because of imprecision and inaccuracies of the book. I have found even flaws of *Orientalism* to be very enlightening to me, such as Said's act of delimitation, as they raised useful methodological questions relevant to me. Even more compelling are the questions that Said raises. After all, "*Orientalism* is a partisan book, not a theoretical machine," (339) and its content was meant to get discussion going rather than used as a theory. Its values lies in provoking scholars to raise new questions or look at old questions in different ways rather than being used as a theory that explains British-French Orientalism of the Islamic Middle East and much less the one that extends beyond Said's own scope.

[8] Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," 111-114.
[9] Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

For example, how can we, as historians, effectively represent the "other?" This question is relevant to me on mainly two levels. On one level, I am a Korean Sinologist educated mainly in the U.S. On the other level, my interest in borders and intercultural relations means that I deal with many sources that were written by people who lived between boundaries- frontiersmen, transfrontiersmen, travelers, and so on. Said has shown how it was possible for some earlier Orientalists to completely misrepresent "the Orient"—even though Said would argue that they did not actually "misrepresent" it *per se*—even after they had resided there for many years due to "the sheer egoistic powers of the European consciousness at their center" (158). Said also implies that being an intimate outsider (my wording) in both his place of origin and the "contact zone" might be conducive to a more effective representation through the case of Louis Massignon. Massignon was an intimate outsider in the field of Orientalism because he did not feel an ease working within established institutions like Gibb did despite his association and sympathy with them (275). At the same time, Massignon was an intimate outsider in the Middle East because he looked at it from a position of an outsider, albeit that of an intimate one as his friendships and sympathy with *contemporary* Muslims would indicate (266-274). Indeed, it was Said's position as an intimate outsider in both his place of origin and contact zone—the West and Orientalism, respectively, that allowed Said to see through the current state of Orientalism the way he saw. Said was an outsider in the West because of his position as an Arab Palestinian and in Orientalism because he simply did not belong to the field. Yet his Western education and his deep awareness as an "Oriental" enabled him to see through Orientalism. The position of an intimate outsider enables one, or rather helps one, to do away with egoistic powers of self-consciousness and thus eliminate one of the barriers placed between him and the object of representation.

So where does that leave me? On the personal level, I honestly do not know yet. I do not know enough about the past and current state of American, Chinese, and Korean historiography of pre-modern China to proclaim that I know how to represent my own "other" effectively. Yet what I know is that I will always keep in mind to always try to identify what comes at the *center* of the way I look at things, the way I try to make sense of them, and the way I represent them I see fit. Trying to identify how to represent the "other" probably will be my lifelong quest as a scholar that goes along with the questions of self-reflectivity and knowing the intellectual history of my own field. On the level of the sources, however, I think I have a better idea of how to read them. It seems important to identify contextuality of each source examined, but not necessarily textual attitude as imagined by Said because doing so will deny agency on behalf of individual authors and the "other" represented. What were the cultural and intellectual origins that formed the basis of representation of the "other" for an individual, both in his place of origin and "contact zone"? The examination of contextuality, of course, has to go hand-in-hand with the analysis of the text itself. How did the experience of an author, both in his place of origin and "contact zone," inform and challenge his preconceived notion of the "other"? Does the text allow rooms for the "other" to speak for themselves, the way that Orientalists supposedly did not? Are there corresponding sources from the perspective of the "other" so that I can allow rooms for the "other" to speak for themselves, the way Said did not? I am sure that my understanding of the sources of my interest will increase when analyzed with such questions in mind, some of them that I had not even thought of before.

Another interesting question to ask is the distinction between pure and political knowledge. This distinction is very pertinent for my own field, as there is a close association between the discipline and the politics in China. Because of the position of the PRC government

and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) regarding Chinese national identity and issues of minorities, especially those of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan, the study of China can potentially be one filled with policy implications. Indeed, any Sinologist will be familiar with the conventional rule of wisdom to not mess with the three big T's—Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen Square. Otherwise, there are consequences, as is clear from the example of Peter Perdue, a leading historian of China: "I have been denied a visa to China since 2005, following the publication of the book on Xinjiang. I have applied each year and been turned down. The Chinese government has not given a specific reason: It said only, 'You are not welcome in China. You should know why.'"[10] Is this another example of Foucauldian concept of power-knowledge? If so, how can we as historians form a resistance toward it?

Here, I must note that I am not denouncing the value of "pure" scholarship that distances itself from politics, although one could argue that very act of distancing is a political act as well because it is an act of compliance toward the censorship imposed by the PRC government. Most topics of Chinese history will not test the political sensibilities of the PRC government. This particular instance of power-knowledge surely will not prevent the non-Chinese study of China and make the flow of knowledge one-directional. There is an agency on part of Sinologists everywhere. Self-censorship does not have to mean a complete refrain from pursuing sensitive topics; scholars have found a way to wiggle their way out of the conundrum. For example, there is such a thing as reading between the lines. I have seen quite a few works of Chinese scholars who are obligated to follow certain guidelines in their works of history who would say something like: "Tibet has been a Chinese territory from ancient times . . . but foreigners say so and so." Presumably any scholar reading such sentence will know what to make of what

[10] Elizabeth Redden, "The Blacklist Academic Leaders Ignore," (http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/07/14/china). Accessed on October 12, 2008.

"foreigners" have to say! At the same time, this position minimizes the contribution of the scholarship to the outside world. It is not likely that people outside academia will be able to see through "politically correct" (in the eyes of Beijing) euphemisms. I personally believe that the role of a scholar should extend beyond that of academia. In light of recent events—Chinese propaganda on ethnic minorities at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, protests over the issue of Tibet, U.S. designation of ETIM (Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement) as a terrorist organization in 2004, and so on—it is frustrating to see the limited ways that the current scholarship may contribute to the public. But again, I also believe that we as scholars have agency and have means to make the flow of knowledge multi-directional.

As graduate students, we are trained to be critical of the works that we read and find potential points of improvement. I think, however, that such emphasis on flaws of a work carries with it a propensity to discard merits of a work. In other words, we might give a value judgment on a book based on our generalized opinion based on its flaws and thus lose ourselves a chance to learn a great deal. Such has been the case with *Orientalism* with me. I found myself leaning toward discarding the thesis of the book in the beginning, but the more I dwelled on its problems and fine questions it raised the more I began to learn from it. *Orientalism* is not a book filled with answers, and it raises more new questions than it answers old questions. Unlike the thesis of *Orientalism*, which I do not think can be applied beyond the French-British Orientalism in the Islamic Middle East with much validity, Said's questions have more of a universal value for any historian regarding issues such as representations of the other, "pure" versus political scholarship, contexts of a scholarly work within a larger background, self-reflexivity, and so on. For me at least, these questions have helped me broaden my views as a historian, and as such I have found *Orientalism* of some merit to my development as a historian.