Student in Section One

Professor Chen

Perspectives on Humanities

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Orientalism: An Imagination of Westerners

Ancient, mysterious, rich, these are words Western people in the 16th century applied for describing orient – a fascinating new world. orient is to the West as treasury is to explorers. Anonymous adventurers start their journey finding the orient because of the magic of what is described in those books talking about the orient – money, land, and power. However, sometimes the decorations, rhetoric, and expectations of the East carry the description of orient so far beyond the truth, that they become pure imagination. The term orientalism, as a created imagination for Western people to understand oriental world, is a spontaneous and original act of creation that goes beyond truthfulness.

Before moving on, we need to distinguish imagination from truthfulness and fancy. Different from truth and fantasy, imagination gives audiences a new perspective to unpack the world, sometimes even creating a new world in addition to the given one. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge argues in his book *Biographia Literaria*, imagination is divided into two parts, one is shared by all as an unconscious understanding of the structure of the world, the other is purely to the poets who can consciously create a new world on the basis of truthfulness (Coleridge, 62). In other words, the imagination contains creativity which provides people with a new vision looking at the world, giving things new meanings, and endowing life with artistic creation. He also points out that fancy is an inferior faculty to imagination for its lack of creation. As one of the most remarkable writers in the history of Western literature, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote a poem about ancient China, based entirely on his dream, namely imagination – *Kubla Khan*. Although the content has few relationships with Emperor Kubla, it depicts vivid scenery of the rivers and landscape around Xanadu as well as two short stories of maid and poet respectively.

If we consider orientalism as a culture phenomenon, imagination will be an integral component of it. The poet, by which we mean Samuel Taylor Coleridge, dreams about the “pleasure-dome” of *Kubla Khan* in Xanadu, where the sacred river Alph “ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea” (Coleridge, 1). His description of scenery and “the woman wailing for her demon-lover” as well as an “Abyssinian maid” visualizes a magical and strange world in a Westerner’s dream. The poet successfully created an imagination of orient and, to some extent, played a role as an orientalist. And orientalism, as an orientalist’s expectation which almost create a new world out of orient, is an outcome of imagination. This imagination exceeds the truthfulness and gives Westerners a new perspective on orient. I agree completely with this. Everything is very clear so far.

Orientalists, as the creator of orientalism, are inevitably providing people with a subjective view of orient. In his speech “The Meeting of East and West”, Tjan Tjoe Som argued that it is hard for him to determine whether he is able to represent the oriental view because of his Western education and thinking model (Tjan, 18). In contrast to what unsophisticated people think, instead of studying by Orientals, orientalism is the subject studying orients mainly practiced by Westerners, or Western trained people. (I would rephrase your sentence to make it clearer: Orientalism is not, as unsophisticated people think, the studies performed by people living in the Orient, but rather Westerners attempting to study the Orient.) The dilemma is that Western people hold the authority of explaining orientalism. They are not orient people, and their discourse about orientalism is necessarily tinged with non-objectivity. But as Said’s claim in his famous book *Orientalism*, “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient, . . ., either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism” (Said, 2). In addition to the argument, it does not mean that every random person who can leave a comment on orientalism is an orientalist. Orientalism is an academic doctrine, which “indeed the label serves in a number of academic institutions” (Said, 2). A professional who could use conscious sentences describing and depicting the orient is an orientalist.

In this case, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the author of *Kubla Khan*, is an orientalist. he practiced orientalism by writing a poem of his dream, which is completely composed of imagination. It is simple to find out non-objective components in the poem. Typical examples are the description of a singing “Abyssinian maid” and a poet drinking “the milk of Paradise” in the palace (Coleridge, 2). The poet in *Kubla Khan,* is the representative of the Gods, emphasizing the importance of human beings. This humanism idea is influenced by the Renaissance of the 14th to 16th centuries. The combination of Western fancy, poet’s dreaming, and humanism conceives an imagined world of orient, providing audiences with a biased impression. Thus, they are led to a new imagined orient, which is created upon the given orient.

Orientalists are the creators of orientalism, which conveys non-political knowledge as a culture phenomenon. Orientalism is not necessarily a subject that contains components such as history, politics, or economy. In contrast to Said’s perspectives on orientalism, it could be better understood as a pure knowledge which focus on culture only. Tjan Tjoe Som argued in his speech that the problem of East and West, namely orient and occident, is not about the East, but about the West itself (Tjan, 23). As the economic gap is getting closer and closer, Western people need a method to prove their uniqueness.

At the very beginning, the orient is strange to the West. With the West colonial invasion in orients, more and more orient-related knowledge is getting involved in the domain of orientalism. However, analyzing oriental history, politics, and economy are relevant to Asian studies. Compared with Asian studies, orientalism is more like an outlet for Westerners to express their imagination about orient. Orientalism has the subjectivity which Asian studies do not have. The main distinction between them is the tense. Orientalism is a forward looking one which depicts a Western-imagined orient. In the context of orientalism, orient is the imagination exceeding truthfulness. However, Asian studies are backward looking quoting past truths in order to study phenomenon in Asia, namely that Asian studies provide truthfulness instead of subjectivities. In general, considering the distinction between orientalism and Asian studies, the former one should be talked as pure knowledge. Since the foundation of orientalism is the imagination, the imagination cannot be made without a reasonable realistic basis.

Orientalists create orientalism in order to prove their imagination and, to some extent, promote the development of colonialism. As Marco Polo’s description of ancient Chinese architectures and the words used by Samuel Taylor Coleridge depicting the pleasure-dome, orient is described as a “career” for Westerners (I don’t necessarily see the connection between Polo, Coleridge and them making a career out of the Orient. Perhaps you could explain this point in more detail). However, the imagination is not a baseless conjecture, a departure of reality with no corresponding reality. Also, orientalism has its basis on the oriental world. In accordance with Edward Said’s argument, “there were – and there are – cultures and nations and whose location is in the East” (Said, 5). Although orientalism conveys the imagination of Westerners, the orient really exits. The imagination provides motivation for Western sailors such as Christopher Columbus to explore the brave new world. Accompanied by the Age of Discovery, the history of Western colonialization started. Some pieces of oriental imagination are reversed, while some of them remained. Given that the realization of orient is getting more and more deeper, more and more differences will appear, providing more and more materials to practice imagination.

In general, orientalists practice imagination and convey subjective perspectives on orient based upon corresponding reality. And the orientalism is the actions taken by orientalists to prove their imagination. Although the academic discourse of orientalism is still mastered by Western scholars, increasing oriental scholar are now participating in the study. Due to the advantage of collecting first hand material, Oriental’s orientalism is growing to mature.

Use of Sources:

I believe that your use of sources is good. Having said that, after the first half of the essay it seems that your focus shifts from Coleridge to other sources. At this point it is not entirely clear which source is your principal one. The common thread of your essay is the creation of the Orient as a piece of imagination as stated by Said, maybe you should include a few more Said quotes in order to establish a clear principal academic text.

Clarity and Coherence:

The first half and ending of your essay are practically done. It is only in the second half that your points begin to grow repetitive. This could be fixed by increasing the mention of Said to tie everything together through a primary text. Nevertheless, it is easy to follow and well connected.

Format:

Except for a few grammatical errors you seem to be a good writer who only needs some editing to reach your full potential. Throughout the paper I fixed any grammatical errors I came across and suggested alternate sentences when I believed your meaning was not clear.

Grade:

3.756. Your essay is well-written and it is clear that you have unity throughout. With a few edits I think you should have no problem getting an A.

Works Citied

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Kubla Khan”. Poetry Foundation, 2018. Web.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979. Print.

Tjan, Tjoe Som. “The Meeting of East and West”. Hague: W. Van Hoeve, 1953. Print.