

# The Objective Shaping of Chinese Image in the Work of Kazuo Ishiguro: A Case Study of *When We Were Orphans*

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**Abstract:** Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* takes the 1930s Shanghai Concession as its spatial and temporal coordinates and breaks through the logic of traditional colonial narratives through the suspense structure of a detective novel, providing a unique perspective for deconstructing the stereotypical perception of Chinese image. The focuses on two core issues: Firstly, how writers can dissolve the cognitive mechanism of othering and achieve de-othering through narrative strategies. Secondly, how literary writing can reconstruct historical objectivity through the historical restoration of spatial images. Although the novel contains elements of imagination, Kazuo Ishiguro has successfully constructed a relatively objective image of China in his artistic practice by virtue of his self-awareness of de-othering and the historical restoration of the spatial image of Shanghai. His strategies of constructing Chinese image is highly effective and the objective and realistic image of China provides a valuable example for cross-cultural literary creation.

**Keywords:** Kazuo Ishiguro; *When We Were Orphans*; Elimination of otherness

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## 1. Literary practices of de-othering Chinese characters

Previous studies on Kazuo Ishiguro have mostly focused on his narrative structure, the core themes and the presentation of Western culture, but there are few systematic analyses of the image of China (Wang Weixin, 2017). Therefore, the study of Kazuo Ishiguro's objective portrayal of China helps us to explore the true perception and rich imagination of Western society towards China through the perspective of Western writers. In the 19th century, words like savage, inhuman and bestial with strong pejorative colors frequently appeared in people's evaluation of Chinese people (Meng Hua, 2001). However, Kazuo Ishiguro upholds an objective creative concept in his portrayal and presentation of Chinese characters and he resolutely breaks down the traditional barriers of the Western stereotypical perceptions of the Orient.

### 1.1 Dismantling stereotypes: deconstruction of inherent prejudices

When the Orient enters the narrative construct as the other, its image tends to slip into demonizing preconceptions. In the novel, Banks' Japanese friend Akira concocts sensationalized stories around his family's silent servant Ling Tien. "Akira had once happened to glance down the servants' corridor towards Ling Tien's room on a rare occasion when the old man had left his door ajar, and had seen heaped upon the floor the severed hands of men, women, children, apes." (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2019: 393) Every bit of information related to Ling Tien is shrouded in a strong layer of oriental mysticism and is a typical textual reproduction of the othering and distortion of China from a Western perspective. This distorted image is deconstructed through the perspective of a child and it is Banks who assumes this key role. Banks' understanding of Akira's unreliable narrative evolves dynamically, shifting from initial acquiescence to doubt and finally deconstruction. Initially skeptical of Akira's exaggerated portrayal of Ling Tien, Banks, influenced by their friendship and childhood superstitions, accepts Ling Tien's demonized image. However, when Banks enters Ling Tien's bedroom, which Akira had described as a devil's lair, he finds an ordinary, tidy space. This revelation immediately shatters the distorted image of China that Akira's prejudice has constructed. Ling Tien's transformation from a menacing figure to an ordinary person powerfully rejects and deconstructs Western prejudices.

### 1.2 Three-dimensional image construction: giving depth and soul to characters

Kazuo Ishiguro subverts the one-dimensional imaginary through multi-dimensional stereoscopic images both positive and

negative. Firstly, to construct Chinese characters with flesh and blood. Through the interactions of Banks, with a Chinese driver, the traits of the Westerner's self-importance and unwarranted sense of superiority are objectively presented. The driver, arranged by Sarah to pick up Banks from the hotel, is punctual, a competent driver who knows the topography of Shanghai very well. Banks learns about Yeh Chen, a key figure in solving the mystery of the disappearance of the protagonist's parents and the driver knows his location. Banks is thinking of going away with Sarah to chase his love. Conversely, he still wants to continue to investigate the case. After getting out of the car and arriving at the meeting place with Sarah, Banks gives the driver a sum of money and asks him to wait for a while. "The young man's face flushed with anger, and he spun away from the money as though I were proffering something quite repulsive. He sullenly got back into the car and slammed his door." (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2019: 522) The driver, though angry, waits for Banks to take him to Yeh Chen's address. Later, they end up in the dangerous Chapei District due to a detour. Hearing gunshots, Banks is furious: "You pretend to know far more than you do. You're too proud to admit to your shortcomings. That's my definition of a fool exactly. A right fool! Do you hear me? A right and proper fool!" (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2019: 529) However, the driver patiently explains their location, shows the way to the police station, and even draws a map to Yeh Chen's house before leaving. Banks' domineering and unreasonable behavior starkly contrasts with the young driver's enthusiasm and professionalism.

Secondly, there is the negative image of Chinese characters who indulge in self-degradation. At first, Inspector Kung was a renowned detective in the concession. After Banks' father disappeared, his mother said to Banks: "Do you realise, Puffin, Inspector Kung himself has been put in charge of this investigation? Yes, that's right: Inspector Kung. So you see, we've every reason to be hopeful." (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2019: 411) It can be seen from this that Inspector Kung enjoyed great prestige at that time. However, later, when Banks returns to Shanghai to investigate the disappearance of his parents, the Inspector Kung he met again is an image of self-degradation, addicted to opium and getting involved with beggars. The writer confronts Britain's original sin as an opium-importing country with objective strokes. The book flanks Banks' British identity with a self-awareness of facing up to history.

## **2. Historical restoration of spatial images**

The work focuses on the time and space in wartime Shanghai around 1937. Based on the construction of spatial image in the text, Kazuo Ishiguro compares the spatial image of the concession in the text with the real appearance of the historical Shanghai Concession and explores the author's process of textualization of history.

### **2.1 Shanghai in When We Were Orphans: the spatial collision of civilized illusion and suffering reality**

Shanghai is not only the background of the novel's story for the protagonist Banks, but also the key reliance on which Banks gains his identity. Inside the concession, "Here, in other words, at the heart of the maelstrom threatening to suck in the whole of the civilised world, is a pathetic conspiracy of denial; a denial of responsibility which has turned in on itself and gone sour, manifesting itself in the sort of pompous defensiveness I have encountered so often. And here they now were, the so-called elite of Shanghai, treating with such contempt the suffering of their Chinese neighbours across the canal." (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2019: 464) This collective indifference is satirized by through Banks' mouth to show the hypocrisy of these so-called elites. The outside of the concession became the direct bearer of the cruelty of the war. However, it is undeniable that such a description also breaks the falsification and absurdity of the western image of the other and is different from the previous biased description of modern China in Western literature (He Jinxiu, 2020: 41). There is a desperate struggle for life and death, the two spaces coexist simultaneously, jointly interpreting the cruelty and injustice of that era.

### **2.2 Modern Shanghai: the demarcation of the lease boundaries and the polarization of spatial images**

Looking back at history, the Shanghai Concession was gradually formed since the signing of the Shanghai Land Regulations in 1845 (Xiong Yuezhi, 2002). The contrast between the people outside the concession, who were deeply oppressed by the feudal rule and the prosperity and privileges inside the concession reflects the inequality of the nation. Comparing the Shanghai in the historical perspective with the opposing spatial patterns inside and outside the concession as depicted in the text, there is a high degree of overlap between the two. Although this kind of overlap is not equivalent in the absolute sense, there is after all a natural difference between the creation of the text and the objective history that cannot be eliminated, and complete consistency is an ideal state that is difficult to achieve.

## **3. The author's objective construction of the Chinese image is successful**

His multicultural background prevents him from passively accepting and spreading the stereotypes of Orientalism. This diverse identity recognition is a confirmation of his own cultural belonging and evidence of his stance of resistance.

### 3.1 The realistic foundation of shanghai portrayed by the author and its own dual cultural identity

Kazuo Ishiguro has a strong connection with Shanghai, and his depictions of the city are not all based on imagination. His grandfather was sent to work in Shanghai by Toyota in the 1930s, and his father was born in Shanghai. The book is set in Shanghai and is full of rich historical details. From the perspective of personal growth experience, Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan, and later immigrated to the UK. Such a cross-cultural growth experience enabled him to be exposed to diverse cultures since his childhood. Kazuo Ishiguro (2008) himself even rejects the homogeneity of such labels and strived to showcase his unique cultural identity, stance, and strategy. He is concerned with the common feelings and destiny of mankind.

### 3.2 Strategies and achievements of the author's construction of the Chinese image

In terms of the portrayal of character images, Kazuo Ishiguro employs the creative technique of de-othering to achieve a two-way process of deconstruction and construction. At the level of deconstruction, the author makes great efforts to break the othering prejudices centered around the West. At the level of construction, Kazuo Ishiguro maintains an objective attitude and does not go to the extreme of excessive beautification just because he deconstructs negative images. In the creation of spatial images, the author adopts the technique of historical restoration, which fully reflects the text's respect for history and the author's progressive historical view that confronts history head-on. It is precisely because of this profound historical and humanistic concern that Kazuo Ishiguro integrates an objective perspective into his text creation and artistic practice. *When We Were Orphans* is a successful example of Kazuo Ishiguro applying an objective perspective to artistic practice. His strategies have achieved remarkable results, presenting an objective and authentic China to readers and enabling the world to catch a glimpse of the complex appearance and tenacious vitality of China.

## 4. Conclusion

In *When We Were Orphans*, Kazuo Ishiguro's portrayal of the Chinese image showcases the complexity and transcendence of cross-cultural writing. The author, through the gaze of an outsider, presents the colonial urban landscape of Shanghai in the 1930s. At the same time, by virtue of the protagonist Banks' insider identity, he deconstructs the rigid imagination within the discourse of Orientalism. This narrative strategy not only avoids the arrogance of the colonialist perspective but also breaks through the limitations of the nationalistic narrative. It constructs a multi-dimensional and dynamic Chinese image amidst the tension between historical truth and literary fiction.

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