

Kafka “Shanghai-Ed”: Orientalist China in Kafka’s Fiction and Kafkaesque Phenomena in China

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Abstract

During a visit to Shanghai in August 2019, I attempted to use the auto-ethnographic method to answer a few general questions: what is the image of China in Kafka’s literary imagination, what is Kafkaesque in Shanghai, and what is Shanghai-esque in Kafka? Because the combination of theoretical interest, spontaneous ethnographic observations, and personal reflections proved insufficient to respond to these questions, I also analyzed Kafka’s ‘Chinese’ stories, namely *The Great Wall of China*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Message from The Emperor*, *An Old Manuscript*, and *The Letters to Felice*, and two Kafkaesque phenomena in China: the Shanghai World Expo and the Chinese Ghost Cities. I concluded that Kafka’s fiction contains certain Orientalist elements and that, through the perspective of contemporary material Kafkaesque phenomena, are more western than the West.

Keywords: Literary Images of China, Kafka, Orientalism, Kafkaesque, Shanghai

Introduction

In August of 2018, I attended the conference “Crossroads in Cultural Studies” that took place in Shanghai. In an over air-conditioned lecture hall, I delivered a presentation of my research paper about Franz Kafka to Chinese students: “Kafka was a man who wanted to become literature and disappear into it. He succeeded in the dialectical sense. When we speak of Kafka’s literature in the West, the very name Kafka plays the role of a phrase, almost a verbal tic, the glue and filler in various theoretical discourses, the status symbol of politically impotent intellectuals, the drug of preference for post-war German intellectuals beaten down by the burden of the Holocaust and Nazi history, the mascot of all weary bureaucrats, the involuntary apology of the Israeli state, the hyper-realistic emblem of the dark side of modernity.” I discussed many subjects at the conference though none of the ones that had started to interest me the moment I landed in Shanghai’s misty Pudong Airport where I was required to leave not only finger prints but also eye-scans.

As I listened to the many excellent papers about Asian literature and cultural studies, the notion of Kafka as a signifier that represented a legitimate yet limited and possibly anachronistic field of research began to strike me as a Western cliché. Falling under the spell of the impostor syndrome, I became an annoying caricature of the Western researcher coming to Shanghai to expound upon an European literary archetype. In order to at least partially evade the stereotype, I decided during my visit to attempt to answer a number of general questions by making use of the auto-ethnographic method, combining theoretical interests, spontaneous ethnographic observations, and personal reflections (Maréchal, 2010, 43–45) combined with methods of text analysis. What is the image of China in Kafka’s literary imagination and how does Kafka appear in the Chinese imagination? What is Kafkaesque in Shanghai and what is Shanghai-esque in Kafka?

Kafka and the Orient

As we know from the paradigmatic work of Edward Said (1979), Orientalism is a collection of ideas about the Orient from the European perspective, characterized by a fascination with the ostensible paradise-like exoticism of the Orient and the fear of the ostensible animalism and violence of the cultural other. This intellectual, literary, and institutional discourse is understood to be the result of the patronizing attitude of post-Enlightenment travellers, intellectuals, poets, and philosophers of the time (p. 31-72). The Orientalist discourse, taken as a totality of statements and experiences regarding the subject, originally pertaining to Arab cultures, was perpetuated by European travellers at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century who understood the Chinese as one of the variants of the white race. According to the Jesuit

Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, the Peking Chinese were not, because of the colour of their skin, so different from French and Italians. They were not only the racial equivalent of Europeans but the Jesuits also idealized the Chinese state structures of enlightened absolutism and natural philosophy. However, this praise began to wound the pride of Europeans who were insulted by the idea that the Chinese might be even superior to them in terms of morals and religion. As a result, an anti-Jesuit movement emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the reputation of the Chinese in the areas where they were once admired began to suffer. The greatest European scholars of the time – Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, David Hume and Montesquieu – significantly contributed from their armchairs to the Orientalist discourse, which, among other things, connected the warm climate of Asia to despotism and, by way of this argument, strengthened the notion of the selfish and temperamental character of Asians (Hsia, 1996, p. 8–11).

Similarly, Rolf J. Goebel observed (1997) that Herder characterized China as “an embalmed mummy” (p. 66). Friedrich Hegel (2001) was perhaps most exhaustive in establishing the theoretical foundations and normalization of colonialism. He not only criticized the despotic social system of China but also generally dehumanized the Chinese in comparison to Europeans. According to Hegel, morals were not a part of their subjectivity because moral laws were equated with the law of the emperor: “With this abandonment is connected the great immorality of the Chinese. They are notorious for deceiving wherever they can. /.../ Their frauds are most astutely and craftily performed, so that Europeans have to be painfully cautious in dealing with them” (p. 148). The Chinese perceive knowledge only as imitation: “/They are/ too proud to learn anything from Europeans, although they must often recognize their superiority. /.../ Besides, the Europeans, just because of their intelligence, have not yet been able imitate the superficial and perfectly natural cleverness of the Chinese” (p. 155). Moreover Hegel went to great lengths to explain why the Chinese were not only immoral but also knew nothing about history, free will, science, and art (p. 158), adding that their religion is “*pure Nothing*” (p. 148).

By the end of the nineteenth century, this abstract *Nothing* increasingly attracted immoral, irrational, and perverted Europeans who cultivated an ambivalent relationship to the Chinese, which emerged between the years of 1890 and 1925. The Chinese were considered sufficiently inferior and subordinate to be exploited without a bad conscious while at the same time being sufficiently advanced and peaceful for their doctrines to be received with enthusiasm. In Kafka’s literary legacy, the image of China plays various roles that illuminate the consistently contradictory and incomplete Orientalist discourse. In this sense, Kafka’s ambiguous Orientalist perspective on China must be understood in the context of the wider European cultural and political discourse about China at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Kafka is one of the rare modernist writers who mentioned China at all. His inclination toward Chinese literature finds its source in two translations by the philosopher Martin Buber, the editor of the literary magazine entitled *The Jew* in which Kafka published several of his own stories. The translations of Martin Buber were extremely popular in Europe,¹¹ on the one hand because the European powers did not view Asia as equal in terms of their civilizations. The European intention to expand its political and economic influence in Asia emerged from this general prejudice. On the other hand, Westerners hankered for the spiritual fulfillment offered by traditional Chinese philosophy and religion, among which Taoism and Buddhism were particularly well-regarded because of their therapeutic effect on the materialist West. It is hardly surprising therefore that we find analyses of Kafka as a writer who adopted Zen Buddhist and Taoist philosophy (Janouch, 1953, p. 36, 38, 47, 75, 107; McCort, 1991).

Kafka had also read the translation of Pu Songling’s short story collection, *Strange Stories*, translated from Chinese into German by Richard Wilhelm in 1914 (Zhou, 1996, p. 119). It is highly likely that Kafka took inspiration for his animal stories not only from the Prague legend of the Golem, the Jewish Frankenstein, but also from Pu Songling’s strange animal tales in which there appears not only monkeys and dogs but also various mythological hybrids and immortals such as the hunter Gracchus or Red Peter. All of these creatures, as in all cultures, are carriers of cultural meanings important in a specific space and time. Pu Songling placed animal images in his stories with the purpose of revealing the tyrannical feudal system of the Qing Dynasty, its process of transformation frequently made apparent in the emotional condition of his protagonists (Zhou, 1996, p. 113-176).

Kafka gave *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories* to his little sister Otilie, and also admired and recommended the book in a letter to his fiancée Felice Bauer. We also know that Kafka occasionally recited the poems of Yuan Tzu-Tsai found in this same book to Felice and Max Brod (Kafka, 2016, p. 59-60, 88, 161, 165). In his letters to Felice, Kafka orientalised his

uncertainty and alienation as well as his fear of intimacy. He kept Felice at both a safe distance and a fatal proximity, which is perhaps why she remained for him as foreign, threatening, and exotic as China itself, which he even used several times as a sort of poetic mirror drapery to keep him apart from Felice though she was necessary to him for the creation of fantasies that retained their imaginary passion in the letters. Through the imaginary passion in the letters, Kafka both humiliated and redefined himself. For him, the writing of love letters was a literary exercise and gradual overture to his more serious literary production, which began only with the bitter end of the enchanted correspondence and engagement. Where he had mentioned China, he had written of his burning love. The more unresponsive Felice became because of his authoritarian criticism of her taste and his explosions of jealousy, the less he understood her and the more she attracted him, and yet he derived from the relationship the self-confidence he needed to arouse his literary power. When he had drawn enough strength from it, he began to drive Felice away. Using the example of the poem "In Dead of Night" by Tzu-Tsai, he explained to her that she would only inhibit his nocturnal writing because of which he would not be a good husband to her (Canetti, 2012; Kafka, 2016, p. 59-60; Meng, 1996, p. 81).

In Kafka's letters, China becomes a signifier for mutual alienation and growing misunderstanding. His writing brings to light certain characteristics from the general Orientalist discourse of the time. One of these characteristics is the female, which, in the European imagination was equated to the erotic Orient and vice versa. Another is the banal display of abstract ideas of the colonialist mindset and the male chauvinism containing the image of the untamed woman who can only be helped through subordination. Kafka appropriated Orientalism, while at the same time doubting and ironizing it, and finally invalidated its fantastic images. He did the same thing with Felice, who like the Orient, was "present /only/ as an idea and construct but absent as a cultural site with an authentic voice" (Goebel, 1997, p. 62).

Orientalist Topologies: China's Ghost Cities and the Great Wall of China

Modern China differs significantly from its previous Orientalist image. The contemporary flaneur strolling along the avenues of today's Shanghai – surrounded by American big-chain supermarkets, Flemish and gothic architecture, microbreweries, shops selling kitsch and replicas that reveal a phantasmagorical character – might understandably have the feeling he is in a country run by Count Westwest of Kafka's *The Castle* (2009). In locations of privilege and progress, he encounters excessive stereotypes of the West. Even capitalism without democracy, an original Chinese invention as defined in certain debates (Tsai, 2007), could be treated as the Orientalist hyperbole of Western social-political systems. We can explore this skewed image between the West and the Orient in a specific example that seems more authentic than Kafka's fiction.

To wit: a phenomenon that is even more Kafkaesque than the control exerted by countless facial recognition cameras along the streets of China's big cities (which are more Orwellian than Kafkaesque in fact) are the enormous new Chinese cities in which nobody lives. These empty settlements, spontaneously dubbed ghost cities, were eternalized several years ago by the American photographer Kai Caemmerer. They are not ghost cities destroyed by economic collapse but rather premature or not entirely living cities. They contain everything cities do – dozens of skyscrapers, apartment complexes, fountains, sculptures, parks, luxury villas, playgrounds, departments stores – everything but people that is. These modern Chinese cities have emerged as a part of the state's futuristic vision that includes massive numbers of people gradually migrating from the rural countryside to urban centres. The fundamental Kafkaesque premise on which Chinese ghost cities are founded is the astounding amount of land and real estate owned by a single municipal authority (Gray, 2017).

Caemmerer reported on his strange feeling of horror and fascination in response to the unliving things he observed during his morning and evening walks through these asphalt deserts. In Freudian psychoanalysis, this feeling is called "the uncanny" and is defined as the feeling of the strangely familiar that can overcome a person in everyday situations and is characterized by the return of suppressed content in the form of unarticulated anxiety and fascination. In contemporary China, "the uncanny" is most clearly present in architectural copies or replicas. For example, there are three replicas of the Eiffel Tower in China as well as full replicas of smaller European cities (Shepard, 2015, p. 97).

According to Wade Shepard (2015), the construction of many million apartments that nobody may ever be able to afford (only a few years ago in China there were sixty-two million empty apartments) is justified by an economic obligation. Specifically, in the state's building plans, it is forecast that the artificial cities will be built and populated over periods of fifteen to twenty-five years. Some have succeeded – Pudong, what was once swampland around Shanghai, is an example of successful urbanization of this kind – while others will possibly remain empty. The purpose of the projects is to create a

home for the millions of people who will eventually move from the countryside but the actual completion of the planned cities is often impeded by high communist officials who are replaced every five years, a system that often causes the plans to change (p. 39-55).

Submerged beneath the justification for the Chinese ghost cities – in reality the new civilizational achievement of humanity – is a specific situation in which human beings are functionally necessary but at the same redundant, entirely subordinate to empty buildings and futurist visions. As their name suggests, ghost cities may also be one of the contemporary Orientalist images of China that are disseminated through Western media. Shepard's analysis reveals something that is essentially (also) Western: namely, the dark side of disciplinarian authority in which control over the human body that accompanies modernization is even more merciless than control over nature and the world of things. What lies behind the construction of these ghost cities finds its uncanny resemblance in an Oriental equivalent in Kafka's prose.

In Kafka's story "The Great Wall of China" (1993), the stonemasons, like contemporary communist officials, were moved to a new part of the wall every five years. In the story, Kafka presents an important paradox that can be transferred to the modern paradox of Chinese ghost cities: why (according to Kafka) did the stonemasons build the Great Wall non-linearly and in disconnected segments? Why do the Chinese now build cities that quite possibly will never be populated? As a stonemason in the story concludes, these megalomaniacal constructions are analogous to the construction of the nation. The gaps in the construction, similar to the missing people from the countryside in the ghost cities, will only be filled when China tells the people that the construction has been successfully finished. It is best to build a homeland in many places. Thus the stonemasons in the story, like the communist officials who supervise the construction of ghost cities who are replaced every five years, strengthen collective belonging and loyalty through a project that perhaps will never be completed. Although the stonemasons hope that one day the wall will be successfully finished, the empire would want the construction to last forever. Otherwise, the people might get the idea of replacing the empire. Kafka's story is therefore not trivial Orientalist hyperbole. The story refers to the universal and mystified character of authority. In the final analysis, it is not clear whether Kafka was actually describing something closer to home: "the Imperial-Royal Monarchy which outlived the similarly corrupt and decaying Qing Dynasty [...] by only seven years" (Meng, 1996, p. 77).

Jorge Luis Borges (2006) also made use of an interesting historical example to create a compelling depiction of the desire of those in power to surround themselves with an incomprehensible system. At the same time that Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty and founder of the Chinese Empire, was orchestrating the building of the Great Wall, he also ordered the burning of all books that were written before his coronation. Using this precedent-making example, Borges shows that these are not two coincidental actions. It is a practice common to all despots who want to fool everyone but themselves into believing that history began with them. They erase and falsify the past of their own civilization while claiming to defend the nation from foreign barbarism, but barbarism is only an excuse to fend off other different and new ideas that would undermine domestic despotic power and quite possibly enhance the collective achievements and values of human society (p. 179–181). Just as Borges makes a universal comparison, the Great Wall in Kafka becomes the emblem of a "difficult and incalculable /plan/" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 127).

Whoever visits Prague quickly realizes that the city provides the topographical model for many of the peculiar settings in Kafka's prose. The ground plan of the house where Josef K. visits the judicial tribunal would be as impossible to draw as the ground plan of the house of Mr. Pollunder, a friend of the uncle of Karl Rossman, the protagonist of the novel *America* (1998). The New York mansion is comprised of empty rooms and endlessly long and semi-circular corridors along which drafts blow. The urban centre of Prague is thirteen times smaller than the urban centre of Shanghai and yet the confusion and disorientation of the city streets multiply strangely as they grow denser and smaller. Thus, even from the topographical perspective, it is no coincidence that Kafka understood Prague as a labyrinth from which it was impossible to escape. The metaphor of Kafka's relationship to Prague and to his own texts (reflected in his desire for their burning after his death) represents the first part, and his story about the Great Wall the second part, of civilized barbarism. As Borges (2007) wrote, in literature every (good) writer hides the peculiarities that we only notice later in the work of his antecedents and his followers (p. 190–192).

Writing the City and the Book

Like Prague, Shanghai also evokes the narrative structure of Kafka's stories both topographically and symbolically. We can place the stories into a contextual logical whole only with the help of historical-biographical maps: thesis – antithesis – the impossibility and absence of synthesis. Conceptual structures in Kafka's prose are philosophical in an elementary

sense, his style recalling a scientific style of writing: "Kafka's sentences are replete with concessionary words and phrases such as 'indeed ... yet' ('zwar ... aber'), 'though' ('allerdings') /...'" (Bahun, 2014, p. 145). In this sense, Kafka is always on the edge of enlightenment, although at the same time it seems that the knowledge in his literary worlds is organized in medieval fashion by the principles of analogy defined in Michel Foucault's research (2002). This contradiction was also noted by Benjamin (2005) who defined Kafka as a philosopher who wrote "fairy tales for dialecticians" (p. 799), and was always on the verge of recognizing the truth which he "sacrificed for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 144).

The reader experiences these palimpsestic games while reading Kafka's prose just as the flaneur does while walking the streets of Shanghai. The city is so enormous that it would only be possible to describe it in detail with the help of a fictional Borgesian map that would be as big as Shanghai itself (1:1). Because of Shanghai's size, it makes sense to conceive of it as multidimensional, hybrid, and cubistically ordered landscapes. What from one angle looks like an elite and architecturally modern skyscraper from another angle looks like a ramshackle structure in the middle of a building site.

During the hours that I did not spend in airconditioned lecture halls, I lost myself in the overcrowded Shanghai streets surrounded by thousands of people walking, biking, scootering. My body was constantly perspiring because of the high temperature, the humidity, and the polluted air. My eyes squinted against the intensity of colours pulsating from all sides that attracted the gaze here and there. All sorts of vehicles moving at different speeds crossed my field of vision. Not only sirens attacked the aural senses but also inarticulate speech, crying, thunderous coughing, screaming, whispering, humming, scratching, knocking. In a big city, the flaneur not only experiences the comforting admiration of his surroundings but also becomes autistic, overwhelmed by an abundance of stimuli that he cannot metabolize. There is something of literary modernism in this symbolic reading of the city's abundance – in the flood of sounds, scents, images, touch that decelerates, disorients, hypnotizes, and fatigues. Georg Simmel (1998) observed this phenomenon in urban dwellers, noting that as a result of the intensification of nervous stimulation they developed a twisted but necessarily devaluating property to protect them from the excess of inputs to the nervous system: "the [so-called] blasé attitude" (p. 178). Such a person might even wake one day, like Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "Metamorphosis" (2004), encased in a sort of armour.

Roberto Calasso (2006) posits that the most dangerous instant in Kafka's works is the moment of awakening. Both Gregor in *Metamorphosis* and Josef K. in *The Castle* awaken to a world of irreversibly altered things. Moreover, Kafka's Romanesque heroes never sleep; rather they hallucinate in a state of chronic sleeplessness. When they awaken from their hallucinations, it is to a world of nightmares (p. 196–230). These characters are a bureaucrat, a sales agent, immigrants. They could be perceived as precariously employed workers as over-employed servants who are late and wait. The temporary schemes in Kafka's stories and novels are even more complex. As Cohn observed (1968), events are captured in a sort of eternal present in which time is so condensed that it has weight. Moreover, time is revealed in various parameters that we can visualize almost as width, height, and length, and can be perceived as the fourth dimension of space. Reading Kafka's prose, it strikes me that if Kafka had been a painter he would have been a cubist. Although Kafka protagonists are not melancholic, like Hamlet or Werther, it is possible to recognize in them an all-embracing and dislocated but nevertheless ambiguous melancholy. His characters are trapped in the eternal present because of which they are excluded from the time that precedes and follows. Their existence does not include a past or a future. Everything that was and will be is. Thus, they exist in continual crisis. They are lost in a succession of instances between which cuts in time gape open. Thus, Kafka's prose is an artistic intervention of limitless duration, an interruption in the flow of time that is saturated with the beauty of failure. In this sense, there is something revolutionary in his prose – although perhaps only immanent in the temporal sense – something pure, genuine, unchangeable (Corngold, 2018, p. 13).

In Shanghai, I suffered from a case of jetlag that I could not get over because of the general feverishness of the city and my own curiosity. I experienced the spatial-temporary distortions that are typical of Kafka's literature. I came in from the airport on the Maglev levitation magnetic train that cut through the morning humidity at a speed of three hundred kilometres an hour. I briefly spotted a recognizable sportswear brand on a store in the middle of a desolate shanty town: Decathlon. I first saw Shanghai, one of the most modern cities in the world, as an apparition, as if even the anonymous urban dwellers were foreigners like myself and the narrators of Kafka's novels.

The inhabitants of large cities, like Kafka's narrators, are surrounded with an aura of mystery, not concealing their intimate selves in order to deceive or lie. Their mysteriousness and apathy are not merely the consequence of the ungovernable size of the city but also of the breakneck herky-jerky speed with which life hurtles on the wings of the vehicles that conquer the enormous surface area on a daily basis. Inhabitants of such cities have no time to become people. They exist on the

level of missiles or cargo. The speed of the big city allows anonymity, which, in the era of massive digitalization, is now associated with freedom and democracy by more types of people than just exiled writers and compulsive travellers. For instance, Paul Virilio (2007) defines speed as a good that in modern dromocratic, as opposed to democratic, societies is not distributed equally (p. 69). Faster people are richer, freer, more mobile and anonymous. But the speed of the big city also transforms people into unapproachable phantoms that are subject to the law of speed, "the hope of the West" (p. 70). Perhaps the grotesque indifference of inhabitants of large cities disguises their functional replaceability and the fact that their personal narratives are a part of wider discourse, and their daily ways only the effects of the urbanization plan.

Kafka "Shanghaied"

The above also applies to Shanghai, a city that has become the schizophrenic chimera of the following slogan of municipal urbanization: "One dragon's head, four centres". As Shepherd wrote (2015), Shanghai was supposed to become an urban utopia for the middle class by 2020. This was included in the city plans twenty years ago. If part of the utopia of the middle class is the systematic repression of the working class (read: the middle class) and the forced relocation of the poor population, then this goal has been achieved in a strange way (p. 93).

The Shanghai World Expo 2010 represents an example of systematic repression as well as a vivid manifestation of the negative effects of a plan for urbanization that is unspeakably inhumane. One hundred and ninety-three countries from around the world participated in the Shanghai Expo, an enterprise with the slogan "Better City, Better Life", which catapulted Shanghai into the ranks of elite global cities. As is typical in such undertakings, underpaid workers were engaged in gargantuan building projects. But we discover in the Shanghai World Expo an even more horrific side that surpasses even this low standard. The Chinese authorities forcefully relocated twenty thousand households from the six-kilometre area in which the Expo took place. They closed over two hundred and fifty factories. Whoever opposed the project went to jail. In 2013, three years after the Expo, the area was like a neighbourhood of the living dead and its restoration was launched. Today, the extent of this crime, difficult to imagine, is concealed, invisible, perhaps even forgotten. It is possible to view its relics from the top of the Chinese Art Museum, housed in what was the China Pavilion of the Shanghai Expo: new grey buildings with no facades, a scattering of orange cranes, enormous shopping centres, such as the Mercedes Benz Arena, that were built for the Expo (Shepard, 2015). And yet the World Expo was not an exception in the process of Shanghai's urbanization. Poor subtenants who own nothing are stuck in the historical centre and the old parts of the city while wealthier urban dwellers move to newer neighbourhoods. There is still community resistance to ongoing evictions, and even the occasional self-immolation, but we hear little of this. Shepard (2015) exposes one crucial fact: as a result of the "progress" caused by the Chinese economic explosion, sixty-four million people have lost their homes (p. 25).

Shanghai has a primary historical and terminological significance in the world of phantasmagorical capitalist exploitation that currently functions, through its various forms, as the opium of the people. In English dictionaries, Shanghai also appears as a verb which means: "/.../ the use of unscrupulous means to procure sailors for voyages to the Orient, /.../ to put by force or a threat of force into or as if into a place of detention" (Dong, 2000, p. 2) and "to render insensible, as by drugs" (Lee, 1999, p. 4). In the history of Shanghai, it was Westerners who initiated so-called Shanghaing, a verb that can be metaphorically used as deceiving, tricking and usurping through the use of drugs or other means of distorting the reality. In order for the British to protect their inventories of gold, they paid their Shanghai partners for the tea they imported to Europe with opium and this led to a special form of gradual colonization through intoxication, which made any Chinese rebellion against the British more difficult.

When British merchants arrived in Shanghai in 1843, they were given one hundred and forty-three acres of muddy shore-front in the northern part of the Huangpu River which soon became known as the British Settlement. The British were followed by the Americans and the French, and Shanghai soon became a partially colonial city with a Chinese and international section physically divided by the semi-circular wall that the city built in the sixteenth century to protect the city from Japanese pirates. It is no secret that Westerners cultivated a racist attitude toward the local Chinese and that any interest in Chinese language or culture was viewed as an eccentricity. But neither were the local Shanghai residents cosmopolitan. They also viewed the people living in the periphery of Shanghai – Tartars, Mongolians, Manchurians, and other non-Chinese Asians – as barbarians. The most inhuman barbarians of the all were *fan kwei*: white foreigners from the West. These were bizarre, immoral, and uncultivated creatures with grotesque white skin and the long limbs of a mantis covered in strange clothing (Dong, 2000, p. 4).

A somewhat more obscure example of shanghaiing that seems to be if it comes directly from Kafka's Oklahoma theatre in *America*, never presented in detail, appears in the form of the local beggars from the 1920s and 1930s performing their 'artistic' shows on the Bund. Two beggars in particular were well known to the locals: Light in the Head with a nail in his head and a candle affixed on top of it, and the Weeping Wonder, a woman who cries so much that puddles of tears collect around her (Dong, 2000: 202).

In a context that combines shanghaiing and other spectres of contemporary urbanism, Shanghai also appears in two of Kafka's very short stories "A Message from the Emperor" (2004) and "An Old Manuscript" (1993), as a contemporary reading of the stories might pose the question of whether and how the positive effects of this kind of urbanization will be felt by the rural poor for whom they were intended. In other words: when the message comes to those it was intended for, will its expiration date have already passed, its contents having become inauthentic and unimportant? The courier in "A Message from the Emperor" would need several thousand years to successfully deliver the message from the dying emperor to his subject. The message only needs to travel from the centre to the periphery and yet the distance between the palace, the masses, and the window sill upon which the emperor's subject leans as he waits for the message, is unbridgeable. Although the emperor's message, regardless of the contents that are known only to the emperor and his courier, is truly important, it will perhaps in the end remain only in his subject's imagination.

Both "A Message from the Emperor" and "An Old Manuscript" could be read in tandem with the story "The Great Wall of China". "An Old Manuscript" is either a legend from the past that justifies the construction of the Great Wall, or a narrative from the future when barbarians finally manage to cross the border of the disconnected wall. A cobbler narrates a story about nomads from the north who gradually settle in the country and begin to loot and rampage and spread disorder. Using the speech patterns of a simple person, he concludes that the nomads mean no harm – it is just their wild nature. The cobbler spots the emperor at the palace window as he helplessly observes the damage being wrought in his country. The emperor does not know how to drive away the barbarians and the fate of the people therefore remains in the hands of merchants and craftsmen.

Kafka's uncle, Josef Löwy, the most remote and least fictional connection between Kafka and Shanghai, was in precisely this kind of profession. He first worked for many years for a colonial Belgian company in the Congo, then he participated in the construction of the Panama Canal. Later, while working on the construction of the Peking – Hankov railway connection, he lived briefly in Shanghai, a period about which little is known (Northey, 1991, p. 15–30). Kafka's uncle was the kind of traveller Kafka would have wanted to become but, besides his lack of courage, his health did not permit him such a life. The character of an uncle appears in several of Kafka's works, usually a supporting character with similar features as his actual uncle. We recall the character of the uncle mostly from *America* and *The Trial* (1995), where the uncle is a mysterious stranger who appears only fleetingly in the life of the protagonist. The impact of the mysterious stranger on the protagonist is felt only in the background. In *The Trial*, he advises Josef K. regarding the proceeding and invites him to the countryside. In *America*, Karl Rossman is sent by his family to live with his uncle in America because of an affair he is carrying on with a servant girl. With Kafka, the influence of the uncle is not only significant in the literary works in which the uncle has no characteristics but also in the parts of the works where the uncle does not appear at all.

Kafka's uncle was a surveyor by profession similar to the main "prodigal" protagonist of *The Castle* (2009) who searches for the spiritual and material centre of a foreign village. Given that the smaller settings in Kafka's literature tend to be limited to events in a village, often Orientalist in nature, we can also read *The Castle* from the perspective of Kafka's critique of Orientalism, suggesting that he at least slightly acknowledged the problematic nature of his uncle's employment. In this case, we can read the surveyor's disorientation in a positive light and interpretatively "shanghai" the uncle's influence. In this reading, the failure of the surveyor becomes the failure of the occupiers who never were able to and never will be able to completely colonize and transform the local people. If we were to also "shanghai" Kafka's Orientalist images within the anti-Orientalist discourse, we could normalize the fact that Kafka called his uncle a Parisian uncle (Northey, 1991) during the era that Shanghai held the nominal status of the "Paris of the East" (Lee, 1999, p. 12).

Kafka is "the only writer of the Western world who is essentially Chinese" (Canetti, 2012, p. 103). Perhaps Kafka really was Chinese as he had China written on his skin in the same way that the broken law might be tattooed into the skin of a prisoner who has lost autonomy over his own body. In "The Penal Colony" (2004) the defendant is immediately found guilty and within twelve hours he is executed with an advanced apparatus of torture. The novella takes place in an unknown French colony in the tropics where soldiers eat gruel made from rice. Despite this covert allusion to China, the criticism of social advancement that we find in Kafka's literature can also be applied to the contemporary Chinese context.

Surveillance, discipline, and punishment – the functional principles of the progress of modern society as defined by Foucault – seem to be present in the modernization processes of all societies, including China. For this reason, we must be cautious when making statements about the non-modern agrarian China as well as with reckless initiatives that will sooner or later expose the dark side of all that is higher, faster, stronger, and more beautiful. This type of progress tends toward total singularity and the eradication of all differences. Kafka's surveyor could have been a Chinese man who gradually lost spaces of freedom and autonomy over his own body. Kafka's surveyor is therefore a man who measures the earth without tools. He is the tool that is used to enforce the principles of modern society in the inverse vastness of total institutions where: "each individual has his own place; and each place its individual" (Foucault, 1995, p. 143).

Conclusion

China takes on different roles in Kafka's Orientalist images. It represents a fictional space where corrupt authorities, non-functional bureaucracy, and disciplinary or corrective law is mediated, and also the imaginary space of Kafka's ambivalent desire in which the imperial mentality is matched by male chauvinism. What is Kafkaesque in China's Shanghai is total unscrupulous progress, dialectical images of an as-if world, and a vast land under the jurisdiction of a single authority. The only real historical connection between Kafka and Shanghai – a forgotten uncle with a colonial past – is a symbolic link that continues to establish itself materially through phenomena such as ghost cities and the Shanghai World Expo 2010. Shanghai is the place where the West is faced with an uncanny resemblance of its own unconscious, which is also rendered in Kafka's imperfect Orientalist images of China. The attributes Hegel assigned to China – barbaric inhumanity, immorality, slavery, perverse trickery, and a purely nihilist religion (of capital) – are exposed as a mystical dimension that is not originally nor exclusively Chinese but is an essential part of the contemporary Western world.

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