

* Review Essay *

Clash of Empires / Clashes of Interpretations: A Review Essay

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The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making. By Lydia He Liu. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 318.

The Clash of Empires is an ambitious and innovative work. Its many insights attest to the possibilities offered by the so-called linguistic and cultural turns in enriching our understanding of the Chinese past, especially the confrontation between China and Euro-American powers that was to play such a momentous part not only in the making of the societies involved, but modernity as such. On the other hand, enrichment does not necessarily add up to an interpretive break-through. Despite extravagant claims to novelty by advocates of the linguistic and cultural turns in the China field, studies informed by the new approaches more often than not have yielded little more than a rephrasing of long standing explanations of the confrontation. This study is no exception in its confirmation of the colonial relationships that marked the confrontation between the Qing 清 and the British Empires; not an altogether novel finding. The urge to novelty itself is a problem even in the hands of an able scholar such as Lydia Liu. Rather than produce a more complex understanding of the confrontation, a single-minded focus on culture and language inevitably (and, in this case, intentionally) marginalizes earlier explanations based on economic and political relationships. The result is to substitute one kind of reductionism for another. The author describes her undertaking as engaging

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the hetero-cultural legacy of sovereign thinking in the nineteenth century, broadly defined. I emphasize the moments and forms of moral and affective investment in sovereignty that articulate effectively to the modern world of empires and nation-states. The itinerancy of signs and meanings in modern global history requires that a work like this pay close attention to the extraordinary circulation of text, object, and theory across linguistic, ethnic, cultural and civilizational boundaries in modern times. Each chapter of the book investigates a central aspect of the problematic of sovereign thinking and makes a close examination of the texts, whether diplomatic, religious, linguistic, or visual. A sustained focus on desire and sovereign thinking throughout the book enables the disparate strands of my research—on international law, semiotics, imperial gift exchange, missionary translations, grammar books, and colonial photography—to interweave. . . . (p. 2)

The book unfolds through the themes Liu enumerates above. A first chapter, entitled “The Semiotic Turn in International Politics,” offers a discussion of the two themes that are central to Liu’s argument, sovereignty and the linguistic encounter. The discussion of sovereignty is heavily inflected with poststructuralist notions of the relationship between sovereignty, subjectivity and desire. The author’s goal, ultimately, is to inject into poststructuralist discussions a sense of the fundamental part played by colonialism in modern “sovereign thinking.” The question of the “international in the national,” with which the author concludes the chapter, raises an important question about which I will say more below.

The linguistic encounter, theorized in this opening chapter, is pursued in the next two chapters, probably the most original and provocative in the book in what they have to offer, respectively entitled, “the Birth of a Super-Sign” and “Figuring Sovereignty.” Quite simply, “super-sign” refers to those Chinese-language terms that played a crucial part in the Sino-British encounter that derived their meaning not from monolingual etymologies but from their deployment in the encounter itself. Chapter 2 focuses on the term *yi* 夷, conventionally translated as “barbarian,” the use of which in legal documents was officially banned in the Treaty of Tianjin 天津 (1858) at the insistence of the British for its derogatory implications. Liu argues persuasively that the meaning of “barbarian” was not a condition but a product of the encounter, in the process challenging long-standing interpretations in the study of China that the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century were caused at least in part by the “Middle Kingdom’s” arrogant refusal to accept the British (among others) as equals.

The next chapter pursues this argument further into the early eighteenth century, preceding the encounter, and extends it to the very term “Middle Kingdom” itself. This chapter deals with a number of terms, but the most significant is the term *Zhongguo* 中國. Like *yi*, the term *Zhongguo* itself long preceded the Qing encounter with the British. Most probably plural in its original usage in the late Zhou 周 Dynasty (middle kingdoms), *Zhongguo* in eighteenth-century documents was used to denote a distinction between inner and outer (*zhongwai* 中外), as in the Yongzheng 雍正 Emperor’s (1722-1735) reference in one of his edicts to *zhongwai yijia* 中外一

家 (the center and the outer being one family) (p. 85). The family metaphor does not rule out the assumption of superior and inferior, but it does reaffirm the Manchu emperors' perception of the unity of the central and the outer, at least where their subjects were concerned. Even more important was the invention of the "super-sign," *Zhongguo* / China. As late as the late nineteenth century, Qing officials complained about the foreigners' use of "China" to refer to the state the proper name for which was the Great Qing State (*Da Qing guo* 大清國). It was in the course of the encounter, and the legal treaties signed between the Qing and foreign powers that *Zhongguo* was to come to be identified with China, no less for the subjects of the Qing than for foreigners. In the Chinese language versions of these treaties, beginning in the 1860s, Qing and *Zhongguo* were often used interchangeably to correspond to "China" in the foreign versions. The very name for China, and the self-identification as nationals that went with it, in other words, were born of the encounter with the outside world. This theme is developed further in the next chapter, "Translating International Law," which was to introduce Qing officials to modern notions of sovereignty as defined through inter-state relations in Europe and North America. A map included in the first Chinese language translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* (1864) already marked the Qing as *Zhongguo*.

On the other hand, the production of China and Chineseness in the course of the encounter is not to be taken as easy compliance with a hegemonic colonialist universalism. In her discussion of another "super-sign," this time a popular one, *fan gui* 番鬼 (foreign devils), Liu offers an analysis similar to that for *yi*, that "*fan gui* registered stronger feelings of fear, revulsion, and hatred rather than 'contempt' (p. 100), as most foreigners interpreted it. In a case such as the Sanyuanli 三元里 popular campaign against British troops in Guangdong 廣東 in 1841, "the dialectal term *fan gui* staged what seemed like a nation-wide guerilla war against the intruders" (p. 101). The standard British response to "foreign devils" as an appellation of insult, Liu suggests, may have been a product less of Chinese intentions than of a profound anxiety that has attended the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, an anxiety on the part of the sovereign subject of colonialism who is "haunted by the fear it projects onto the other" (p. 106), and conjures "its wholeness, positivity, and reality by battling the ghost of the other within the self" (p. 108).

This same ambivalence appears in the translation of texts that regulated colonial relations, namely texts of international law. International law represented another vehicle of colonial domination in forcing the Qing into a new system of international relations. On the other hand, international law itself was subject to interpretation in the very process of translation. Wheaton's *Elements of International Law*, representing a United States' take on international law, may have won out over competitors thanks to the efforts of the translator, the influential American missionary W. A. P. Martin. More important was a skepticism concerning the universalist pretensions of the translators of international law. Qing officials such as Lin Zexu 林則徐 took the new international law not as the truth of international relations but as one more way to deal

with a novel situation: “. . . Lin treated international law not as the universal truth but as a mode of persuasion that would enable him to argue against the harmful effects of the opium trade in a language he thought the British could understand” (p. 119). While a missionary such as Martin believed in international law as an expression of a universal Christian civilization, moreover, his very efforts to find equivalents to concepts of international law in the vocabulary of Neo-Confucian political philosophy reworked the content of universalism as it also endowed the Chinese vocabulary with new meanings. The rendering of positive into natural law, a prerequisite of the claims to universality, demanded incorporation into it of engagements with others, colonialist though they may have been, that would also change the scope of international law over the years.

The last three chapters of the book proceed in a slightly different vein. Chapter 5, “The Secret of Her Greatness,” examines the “hetero-cultural circulation of gender in the nineteenth century” (p. 153), focusing on the Empress Dowager, Cixi 慈禧. The gift of a bible by missionary women to the Empress Dowager on her birthday recalls to Liu a similar gift by Queen Victoria to her colonial subjects in an expression of “England’s Greatness,” prompting a reflection on the ways in which women partook of the unequal relations of colonialism even as they struggled for equality back home. The Empress Dowager’s return gifts, “feminine trifles,” underlined not her femininity, Liu suggests, but her “position of a patriarchal sovereign” (p. 164). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the loyalty to the Qing dynasty, and the Empress Dowager in particular, among Chinese Overseas, in particular the philosopher Ku Hung-ming 辜鴻銘, born in Malaysia and educated in Europe, who for a while was employed in the Qing diplomatic service, working for Viceroy Zhang Zhidong 張之洞.

Chapter 6, “The Sovereign Subject of Grammar,” offers an analysis of the first comprehensive grammar of classical Chinese published in 1898 by another Qing official educated abroad, Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠. While Ma drew upon earlier discussions of grammatical problems, his was the first to engage in what might be called “comparative grammar.” Liu offers a cogent discussion of the problems involved in analyzing Chinese in terms of principles formulated through the analysis of other languages, with particular emphasis on another “super-sign,” *zi* 字 / word (finding an equivalence between Chinese characters and words in romance languages).

The final and the concluding chapter, “The Emperor’s Empty Throne,” examines the fate of two Qing imperial thrones, one in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the other in the Forbidden City in Beijing, and how they have entered visual representations on a number of occasions, most importantly in Japanese imperial photography and Bernardo Bertolucci’s film, *The Last Emperor*. The discussion allows Liu to make a statement, by way of conclusion, on the relationship between colonialism and photography.

Liu’s discussions proceed at a high level of sophistication theoretically, and in her original readings of texts of various kinds. The discussions have much to tell us not only about the implications for the Qing of the encounter with the British and

Americans, but also about how these encounters, and the European colonization of the world, have gone into the making of modern epistemologies, which is usually not acknowledged in colonial humanities and social sciences. “The theory of the super-sign,” she writes,

is . . . intended to help overcome the implicit monolingual assumptions of our inherited language theories and semiotic work in recognition of the fact that the majority of the world’s populations today are increasingly bilingual or trilingual. Such awareness ought to have a significant bearing on our study of empire and the history of empire because the phenomenon of multilingualism is the outcome of the colonial and imperial warfare of the past (p. 211).

While the author does not say so in as many words, we may infer from the discussions that the formation of the modern world, with all its institutions and epistemologies, is to be understood not as the diffusion of modernity from a Euro / American center, nor even as a confrontation between distinct histories with their separate logics, but of histories entangled in one another, deriving both their “civilizational” self-images and their historical trajectories from the entanglement, whether peaceful or hostile. Even when they were between empires, the confrontations were to result in severe inequalities in power, as the empires in question were vastly different kinds of empires driven by different forces. The modernity those confrontations produced was a colonial modernity the effects of which are still with us even as the formerly colonized and dominated once again assert themselves in claims to alternative modernities. The cultural effects may have gone even deeper. To recall a metaphor suggested by Joseph Levenson forty years ago to grasp the results of the “Sino-Western” confrontation, China as it entered modernity experienced a change of language, the West, a change of vocabulary. That distinction still rings true. The question is why?

Despite its repeated invocation of colonialism, and the reference to “the invention of China” in the subtitle of the book, it is this fundamental question that Liu’s study fails to address. Part of the answer lies with the author’s choice of emphasis, namely, her focus on “desire and sovereign thinking,” as she puts it, and her preoccupation with semiotics to the exclusion of fundamental issues of political economy. But the book also suffers from a general lack of focus. In spite of the sharp, and at times brilliant, insights in individual discussions, the book in the end leaves the reader wondering what it was all about. In the absence of narrative continuity which the author eschews, intentionally or otherwise, a study such as this one depends for its coherence on its analytical integrity, which is hidden from the reader in this case by what appears throughout, but especially in the second half of the book, as a haphazard choice of themes.

Very briefly, the first four chapters do have analytical continuity in addressing different aspects of the problem of translation, and the generation in the process of

the “super-signs” that represented not merely reconceptualizations of older terms but a new geopolitical order: the homogenization through the one word *yi* of a complex set of differentiated relations in Eastern Asia that had preceded the encounter (terms such as *man* 蠻 and *di* 狄 that denoted different neighbors of China with different “civilizational” attributes that went beyond a simple distinction of *zhong/wai*, or center and outer). Not the least important aspect of this transformation was the transformation of the Central Kingdom (singular by now) into China, the nation-state. Whatever the gloss Qing officials may have placed upon the international law in translation, the assimilation of the law unavoidably represented also the assimilation of the Qing to a new international order the terms of which had been set elsewhere. International law may have been subject to transformation to accommodate novel encounters between Euro / Americans and previously unfamiliar peoples, but that does not change the fact that it forced a new historical trajectory upon the newcomers.

Unfortunately, rather than pursue these semiotic transformations to their geopolitical origins and outcomes, the study turns abruptly in Chapter 5 to the question of gender. The “hetero-cultural circulation of gender” may have a superficial resemblance to translation and the new order implied by the texts of treaties, but the resemblance is only superficial. Much the same could be said of questions of visuality introduced in the concluding chapter. These chapters read as if they were intended to fulfill the expectations of fashions in contemporary cultural studies in the United States rather than to provide further windows into issues of translation and translanguality. Especially mystifying is the inclusion in the chapter on Cixi (Chapter 5) of the eccentric Ku Hung-ming. Liu’s references to Chinese Overseas and the Chinese diaspora suggest that Ku is included in the discussion to bring to the evaluations of the Empress Dowager a diasporic Chinese perspective. While bringing Chinese Overseas into the history of developments on the Mainland itself is to be lauded, the suggestion that someone like Ku was representative of Chinese Overseas is quite misleading. It is also unfortunate that the chapter on grammar (Chapter 6) is sandwiched between discussions of gender and visuality, and thereby separated from the more linguistically oriented discussions in the first four chapters with which it has in common the question of language which the author takes to be “at the heart of nineteenth-century arguments about entitlements, injury, and sovereign rights” (pp. 211-212). It is to be regretted, finally, that the book has neither a substantial introduction, to explicate the conceptualizations that inform it, or a real conclusion tying together its various arguments, as the concluding chapter as it stands is devoted most importantly to the adventures of the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor’s missing thrones, and, more sketchily, to issues of visuality.

More substantial are problems presented by the notions of “sovereign thinking” and “the semiotic turn of international politics in the long nineteenth century” (p. 10) that provide the conceptual framework(s) for the study. The issue of sovereignty is no doubt of the utmost significance during the period under discussion, but the study does not offer a conceptualization of sovereignty that might have provided

some coherence to the themes that it takes up. Readers will be frustrated that the study, which takes sovereignty as its focus and organizing frame, makes no sustained effort to chart transformations in Qing conceptions of sovereignty, or to explain the contradictions created by imperialism in the British “sovereign thinking.” Liu uses sovereignty and “sovereign thinking” interchangeably throughout the study, and, with poststructuralist inspiration, couples the latter with “desire.” Poststructuralist interpretations of sovereignty no doubt have enriched the understanding of sovereignty by bringing to it a psychic element. On the other hand, a critical deployment of poststructuralist theorizing also needs recognition of a predicament in the conjoining of a concept that is ultimately political, economic and cultural to the psychic, which abolishes the difference between sovereignty as an individual attribute and sovereignty as a public / political assumption or aspiration. Liu’s usage makes little effort to distinguish the two, if only for historical and analytical purposes, which is exacerbated by the conflation of the two terms, sovereignty and sovereign thinking. Indeed, except for a brief discussion in the last section of Chapter 1, where the author seeks a corrective to poststructuralist conceptions by pointing to the origins of notions of sovereignty in colonialism, the study is more interested in the relationship between “desire and sovereign thinking . . . [that] enables the disparate strands of my research . . . to interweave” (p. 2). The interweaving is made possible by vagueness in the deployment of the concept. Perhaps even more revealingly, the emphasis on the subjective and the psychic leads the author in the concluding chapter to reach the highly questionable (if not silly) conclusion that British aggression against the Qing in the course of the nineteenth century was driven by a “will to retaliate against the Chinese for the humiliation of the British on the symbolic front. . . . Taking possession of the throne chair of the Qianlong Emperor and putting it on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum amounted to settling an old score with a dead Qing Emperor” (p. 217). I wonder how this kind of psychologism is an improvement over the culturalism of an earlier colonial historiography which, for all its faults, at least addressed tangible issues. We might ponder its echoes with a more recent claim by an American President that he was out to get Saddam Hussein “because he tried to kill my daddy!” The statement no doubt meant something to the President. Few would care to use it in explanations of U.S. policy in Southwestern Asia.

At the very least, the psychic turn on display here makes issues of sovereignty rather meaningless—not only for the British but also for the Qing. While Liu pays lip service to structural issues of political economy (p. 217), the study nevertheless has little to say about the political economic context of the discussion of sovereignty, except in the section of Chapter 1 to which I referred above. There is a clear recognition in that section of a contradiction in an international law that insists on sovereignty as a fundamental principle of international law, but proceeds to undermine the same sovereignty by an insistence that the right to trade, and international commerce, was also a sovereign right open to all. The two need not be in contradiction of necessity, but often are in practice, as they seek to reconcile the assumption

of political sovereignty with the globalizing urges of a capitalist economy under conditions of unequal power.

The study has little to say on this important question, possibly because it invites into the discussion of sovereignty a Marxist perspective which the author rejects explicitly when she writes that, “when it comes to conceptualizing the historical real, Marxist historians have tended to fall back on a set of historiographic approaches and assumptions about the value of the data and ways of analyzing primary source materials which differ very little from those used in colonial historiography” (p. 111). Leaving aside the question of whether or not Marxism must be condemned to positivism, this cavalier dismissal of historical practice for its concern for “the real” offers little more than a shallow justification for those who would imagine the past as they please. Without a sense of the real, and the respect for evidence that it enjoins, the past may be made to say what we wish it to say, which historians have recognized for long as a predicament of historical practice. Having declared Marxism to be complicit with colonialism in its very methodological assumptions, the Marxist critique of imperialism and colonialism may safely be ignored, and postcolonial literary scholars may pride themselves for having discovered the real colonialism in the interplay of signs—blissfully unaware that colonialism itself gets lost in the translation. It is equally curious that the sole Marxist historian Liu cites in illustration of her arbitrary judgments on Marxist historiography is the Chinese historian Hu Sheng 胡繩 (1918-2000) who, however distinguished, hardly represents Marxist historiography in all its variety. Liu’s de-historicizing of the past is rather commonplace among literary and historical scholars given to the temptations of postcolonial criticism and poststructuralism, who seem to find in theory not a means to complicate earlier, materially-grounded, understandings of domination and hegemony but license to render the past into a plaything of interpretation. The “cultural turn” so-called has served as an excuse for bypassing a whole generation of Marxist historiography in the China field to pick bones with an earlier generation of “colonial historians,” the “infamous” Fairbank generation—possibly because the two share in common a culturalist disposition in interpreting the past.

Much the same may be said about “the semiotic turn in international politics in the nineteenth century” which justifies the approach adopted here. It is curious that the author finds the reason for this semiotic turn in the material transformations of the late nineteenth century from maritime transportation to railroads and new instruments of communication (pp. 10-11). Curiously, having prompted the new concern with semiotics, these material developments recede from history, leaving behind little more than the signs they had generated. Liu makes little effort beyond these references to material developments to show that there was indeed such a semiotic shift that distinguished this period of globalism from other periods before or after. I am reminded here of a rhetorical question with which Tzvetan Todorov opened up his *The Conquest*

*of America*¹: “Did Columbus conquer America by signs?” Perhaps the British in the nineteenth century were mimicking Columbus, but the question is a reminder that while semiotics in international politics may have received a new impetus from the proliferation of sign-producing material developments, that does not make it novel, nor justify speaking of a “semiotic turn” at the expense of all the other developments of the times (from railroad and battleship turn to cultural turn, national turn, whatever). It is not that historians should not pay close attention to semiotics. The question is, rather, whether or not semiotics should be isolated from all its social, political and material associations, and rendered into a privileged site of historical inquiry. We might wonder whether the semiotic turn in question is a turn of the nineteenth century, or the turn that contemporary cultural studies has taken in its urge to escape from its Marxist (and social) legacies, and now projects its own ideological dispositions upon the past.

The distinction is obviously an important one. New times bring with them new perceptions, and new theoretical formulations about the past. If these theories and explanations are to go beyond passing fashions or ideological service to open up new critical horizons, they need to be keenly aware of their own historicity, and of the circumstances of which they are the product, as well as their own intellectual and political consequences. It is also important, if they are to be endowed with paradigmatic status of one kind or another, that they proceed not by dismissing earlier explanations but by incorporating them in fuller, more comprehensive explanations. *The Clash of Empires* offers much by way of promise in these directions, but the promise remains unfulfilled. There is a lesson there for all of us—in the China field and beyond.

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).