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Book Review: *China and Orientalism*

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Vukovich, Daniel F. [China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.](#) Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012. xviii, 185 pp. \$130.00 (cloth).

By Fabio Lanza

This slim, sharply-argued volume should be a mandatory reading for all of us who work on post-1949 China. *China and Orientalism* is a refreshing and often eye-opening analysis on how knowledge of the object called “China” has been constructed in the West since the end of Maoism. That knowledge, as Vukovich cogently demonstrates, is fundamentally flawed.

Writing as a “barbarian” outside the disciplinary gates— i.e. a self-declared non-sinologist (pp. xii-xiii) —Vukovich argues that, since the late 1970s, Western knowledge production about the PRC has been dominated and defined by a new form of Orientalism. But while for Edward Said the East was the irreducible “other,” the location of the absolute difference, the new Sinological-Orientalism construes China as the place of “becoming sameness” (p. 2). By this he means that China remains the other—it is still not normal—but is now placed within a scale of hierarchical difference, one in which it is always in the process of becoming like the West: liberal, open, modern, and free. In Vukovich’s essential re-formulation, this China is always the realm of the “not yet” (p. 3). In this sense, Sinological-Orientalism, as embodied by the scholarship of the China studies field, continues on the well-worn path of Cold War discourse, which was in turn displacing and subsuming the language of colonialism. With this novel incarnation of Orientalism, the domination of modernization theory and anti-communism is even more total and unopposed, Vukovich argues, because the actual existence of Maoist China briefly allowed for the possibility of an alternative to this domination, and that possibility is now irreparably gone. Also gone, one may add, is the radical scholarship that China inspired in the West throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Without that counterpart, the dominance of the Sinological-Orientalist gaze is seemingly absolute and irrefutable.

Written with spunk and with attention to theoretical details, *China and Orientalism* relies on an impressive array of examples and Vukovich’s solid analysis. Vukovich is keen to show how the object “China” has not been produced *only* or *specifically* in the hallowed halls of Western academia; rather, the colonial discourse of Sinological-Orientalism is part of a larger knowledge/power articulation. In fact, one added bonus of the work is that it illustrates how this perception of China is manufactured through the repetition, across different fields, of the same colonial discourse. Vukovich moves with dexterity among literature, scholarship, film, and journalism, from Don DeLillo’s *MAO II* to the documentary *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, from Slavoj Žižek to the pages of the *New York Times*.

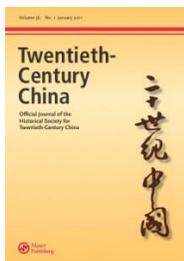
To take just one example, looking at the Tiananmen protests of 1989, Vukovich singles out how the event has been recoded in Western interpretations as the narrative of an always-emerging civil society. His criticism is particularly biting when he illustrates how the statements of the workers in the Square were twisted and re-interpreted because of their criticism of the socio-

economic effects of the reforms and their overtly Maoist vocabulary. The latter can only be ignored or ascribed to nostalgia, so that the workers can be incorporated under the civil society model. No matter what they actually say or do, Vukovich argues, the people of China are perceived by foreign observers as ultimately wanting to become the same with the West—and thus they are always doomed to fail.

Vukovich's examination of the recent outpouring of literature on the Great Leap Forward and the ensuing famine is also particularly timely and subtle. By scrutinizing the claims and the narrative strategies of works such as Jasper Becker's *Hungry Ghosts* and Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine*, Vukovich invites us to look at the meaning of the very act of counting, behind the race towards generating the always-increasing death toll accounts. He suggests that the drive to produce knowledge on the Great Leap disproportionately in the form of numbers—rather than analyses of its economy and the causes for its failure, as Jack Gray and Carl Riskin have provided—might have a more profound significance, masked behind the professed anti-theoretical empiricism of this scholarship. By reducing the experiments of the Maoist period to a statistical set of “excess deaths,” it becomes much easier to dismiss collectivism or socialism in their entirety, and with that any residual challenge they may still pose today to the neoliberal model. Moreover, as Vukovich illustrates by referencing Bernard Cohn's theory on British knowledge production in India, this “enumerative modality” is essentially colonial. It is also, and this is another crucial point of the book, essentially anti-political. A fundamental aspect of Sinological-Orientalism in all its manifestations is the denial of any political value to the Maoist and post-Maoist periods, as though politics ceased to exist in China after 1949, or could exist only as failed mimicry of the liberal West (as in 1989).

Reading Vukovich's book leads me to wonder what a volume about knowledge production of the PRC *within China* would look like. Anecdotally, one could cite examples of the penetration and absorption of Sinological-Orientalist discourse in the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan; self-orientalizing is nothing new, and Vukovich hints at it in his critique of Chen Xiomei's *Occidentalism*, but a more systematic analysis is needed. This obviously exceeds the scope of *China and Orientalism*, but I hope that Vukovich might take it up in a future project.

China and Orientalism is an essential contribution to our self-awareness as producers of knowledge and offers a welcome and indispensable criticism of the field. But Vukovich also provides examples throughout the volume of how a non-orientalist approach can be formulated, be it in the analysis of student protests or in film criticism, as in his appraisal of the movie *Breaking With Old Ideas* (Jue Lie). As for the prospects for a post-orientalist practice in the field of knowledge production, I tend to be more hopeful—or maybe I am simply more naïve: the very existence of a book such as *China and Orientalism* demonstrates the fact that there are scholars striving to construe, with the tools of theory and empirical research, a different approach to the study of China.



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