

Original Paper

A Study of Representation of Chinese Culture in W. Somerset

Maugham's *The Painted Veil*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes W. Somerset Maugham's "The Painted Veil" from the perspective of image studies and its representation of Chinese culture. The importance of cultural representation in literature is discussed, and the research question is posed: how does Maugham represent China and its culture in his novel? The study examines the relationship between image studies and literature, with a focus on Maugham's portrayal of Chinese people and customs, as well as the themes related to Chinese culture in the novel. A comparison is made with other works of Maugham and other authors representing China and its culture, and the similarities and differences are discussed. The paper concludes a summary of the main points negative view of Chinese culture, highlighting issues such as hypocrisy, decadence, gender discrimination, and cultural clashes within Chinese society and an evaluation of Maugham's representation of China and its culture, as well as its implications for literature and cultural representation.

Keywords

image studies, cultural representation, W. Somerset Maugham, "The Painted Veil", China, Chinese culture, literature

1. Introduction

1.1 Background Information on W. Somerset Maugham and “The Painted Veil”

W. Somerset Maugham was an English author, playwright, and essayist, he was born in 1874 and passed away in 1965. He is best known of *Human Bondage* and *The Razor’s Edge* as well as *The Circle*. Maugham’s writing style was characterized by a clear, concise, and understated prose, which often reflects his own experiences as a doctor, traveler, and observer of human nature. *The Painted Veil* is one of Maugham’s most popular novels. Set in 1920s colonial China, *The Painted Veil* follows Kitty Fane, who reluctantly accompanies her husband Walter, a bacteriologist, Accompany to a remote village to combat a cholera epidemic. Initially unhappy and longing for her lover Charles, Kitty gradually develops an appreciation for Walter’s selflessness and sympathy for the suffering of Chinese people. The novel explores themes of love, forgiveness, and redemption, while vividly portraying the clashes of Western and Eastern cultures. W. Somerset Maugham’s background as a doctor and his personal experiences in China contributed to the authenticity of the novel’s setting and characters. In colonial China during the 1920s, the author tells the story of Kitty Fane, a young woman who marries Walter Fane, a bacteriologist. Kitty is not in love with Walter and has been having an affair with a married man, Charles Townsend. When Walter discovers the affair, he gives Kitty the ultimatum of either accompanying him to a remote village in China, where he is working to combat a cholera epidemic, or facing social humiliation and the end of their marriage. Kitty reluctantly agrees to go to China with Walter. In China, Kitty finds herself isolated and unhappy, as she is unable to fit in with the other Europeans in the area. Her relationship with Walter remains strained, and she continues to pine for Charles Townsend. However, as time passes, Kitty begins to appreciate Walter’s selflessness and the devotion he develops to his work. She also becomes more aware of the poverty and suffering of the Chinese people and becomes involved in helping and aiding them. *The Painted Veil* is a novel that explores the themes of love, forgiveness, and redemption. Maugham’s portrayal of China and its people is vivid and authentic, reflecting his own experiences of living in the country.

The novel also explores the clashes of Western and Eastern cultures and the difficulties that arise when individuals try to reconcile two different worlds. W. Somerset Maugham was a prolific writer who explored many aspects of human nature in his work. *The Painted Veil* is one of his most well-known novels, and it continues to be popular today due to its compelling storytelling and exploration of complex themes. Maugham’s background as a doctor and traveler, as well as his experience living in China contributed to the authenticity of the novel’s setting and characters.

1.2 Importance of Cultural Representation in Literature

Cultural representation in literature is of utmost importance as it helps preserve and promote diverse stories, perspectives, and experiences. The inclusion of diverse cultures in literature plays a crucial role in challenging stereotypes and expanding readers’ perspectives. In addition, Cultural representation in literature not only plays a crucial role in the development of identity, but also provides a way for

individuals, especially those from minority groups, to connect with their cultural heritage and find a sense of belonging. When a person sees themselves represented in literature, they feel seen, heard, and validated. This is especially important for individuals from minority groups who often feel excluded and marginalized in mainstream society.

Representation in literature provides a way for these individuals to connect with their cultural heritage and find a sense of belonging. However, the absence or misrepresentation of certain cultural groups in literature can have detrimental effects. "Literature is a mirror to society. When the mirror reflects the voices and experiences of all cultural groups, it allows readers to connect with their heritage and find a sense of belonging. But when certain cultural groups are absent or misrepresented in literature, it can leave individuals feeling marginalized and disconnected". It reinforces harmful stereotypes and can perpetuate discrimination and prejudice. Without proper representation, marginalized communities are left out of the literary conversation and are denied the opportunity to share their stories and perspectives. Cultural representation in literature is vital for any society. It embodies the concept of cultural diversity, a fundamental cornerstone in the field of cultural studies, and promotes diversity, encourages inclusivity, fosters empathy, and supports the development of identity. By showcasing a wide range of cultures and perspectives, literature cultivates inclusivity by acknowledging and appreciating different societal experiences and voices, fostering a sense of belonging among individuals with diverse backgrounds. Moreover, the depiction of diverse cultural narratives in literature enables readers to step into the shoes of characters from different backgrounds, thereby fostering empathy and dismantling stereotypes. This, in turn, facilitates the development of individual and collective identities, as individuals are provided with alternative perspectives and narratives from which to construct and negotiate their own sense of self. By highlighting the unique perspectives and experiences of different cultural groups, literature has the power to shape our understanding of the world and inspire positive change. As readers and writers, we must work to ensure that literature accurately represents the diversity of our world and promotes cultural understanding and appreciation.

1.3 Maugham's Representation of China and Chinese Culture in The Painted Veil

For instance, he describes the food and clothing that the characters encounter there, as well as the intricate rituals associated with local marriage and death customs. These descriptions serve to create a sense of distance between the Western characters and the world they have entered. Maugham as a matter of fact carefully avoids romanticizing China, however. He highlights the difficulties that the characters face in adapting to their new surroundings, and he doesn't shy away from the dark aspects of Chinese culture, such as opium addiction and infanticide. Ultimately, Maugham's portrayal of China and its culture in *The Painted Veil* is nuanced and complex. He avoids stereotypes and simplistic portrayals in favor of a more nuanced approach that emphasizes the richness and diversity of Chinese culture. At the same time, he recognizes the difficulties that Westerners face in navigating this complex and unfamiliar world, and he uses these experiences to explore larger themes related to identity, cultural

difference, and the clashes of civilizations.

2. Image Studies and Cultural Representation

2.1 Definition of Image Studies

Image studies, also known as visual studies, are an interdisciplinary field that examines the role of images in shaping our social and cultural experiences. It explores how images are produced, circulated, and consumed in various contexts, including art, media, advertising, politics, and everyday life. Drawing on theories and methods from various disciplines, image studies analyze the ways in which images not only convey meanings, values, emotions, and identities, but also actively participate in constructing our reality. One of the key concerns of image studies is to understand the power of images in shaping our perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about the world. Images are not just visual representations of reality, but active agents that participate in constructing our reality. Images can be both persuasive and resistant, presenting dominant or alternative visions of the world (Gill, 2016).

Image studies analyze images via various methods including semiotics, visual rhetoric, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis, and ethnography. Semiotics studies the meaning and representation of signs and symbols. Visual rhetoric explores how images persuade, inform, or provoke audiences. Discourse analysis examines social and cultural practices in image production and reception. Psychoanalysis delves into unconscious desires and anxieties expressed in images. Ethnography studies image production and consumption in social and cultural contexts. Image studies explore how images convey meanings, values, emotions, and identities, and construct our reality. It utilizes theories and methods to analyze images and reveal underlying social structures and ideologies. Critical analysis of images is crucial for media literacy and cultural citizenship in our visual culture.

2.2 Subhead Importance of Image Studies in Cultural Representation

Image study is an interdisciplinary field that examines the cultural, social, and political implications of visual representations. The study of images is crucial, as visual media has become a major medium of cultural representation and communication in contemporary society. From advertisements and films to social media and news, images are used to convey messages and meanings about culture, society, and identity. Cultural representation refers to the process of constructing, portraying, and understanding cultures through different forms of media. It involves the depiction and interpretation of cultural elements in a society. Such representations can serve as reflections of societal values, beliefs, and attitudes, while also influencing and shaping them. Images, in particular, are powerful tools that can shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and reinforce dominant narratives about culture and identity. The importance of image studies in cultural representation lies in its ability to help us understand how visual representations shape our perceptions of identity, culture, and society. By analyzing images, we can explore how cultural identities and values are portrayed and challenged in the media.

An important aspect of image studies is its role in debunking harmful representations of marginalized communities, as negative portrayals can have detrimental effects on their self-esteem and sense of belonging. Furthermore, image study is crucial in understanding the construction of gender and sexuality in culture, as images often reinforce gender roles and norms. By critically analyzing images, we can challenge heteronormativity and promote inclusive representations of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, image study allows us to examine the underlying ideologies and power relations in visual representations, and work towards social justice and equality.

2.3 Relationship between Image Studies and Literature

The relationship between image studies and literature has been an intriguing topic for scholars. While the two fields differ in their modes of representation, they are intertwined in their underlying themes and techniques. This essay aims to explore the relationship between image studies and literature by examining the similarities and differences between them, the ways in which they are related, and their contributions to each other.

Image studies and literature have similarities in their focus on interpretation, representation, and communication. Both disciplines adopt visual and textual elements to convey meaning, making sense of the world by examining production, circulation, and consumption of representation. They also analyze how cultural, social, political, and psychological factors shape images, texts, and narratives. Additionally, both disciplines critically inquire into the cultural and historical context that produced them. Scholars in literary studies analyze content, form, and themes of texts in relation to specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, while scholars in image studies explore the history, form, and meaning of images in their political, social, and cultural contexts.

Despite the similarities between image studies and literature, there are also significant differences between the two fields. Image studies focus on visual representation, whereas literature is concerned with language, text, and narrative. Image studies use various forms of visual representation, such as paintings, photographs, films, and advertisements, while literature uses written forms of language, such as novels, poems and plays. Moreover, Image studies tend to be more interdisciplinary than literature, drawing on approaches and theories from fields such as cultural studies, media studies, art history, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Meanwhile, Literary studies have a more specialized and established disciplinary framework.

The relationship between image studies and literature is a dynamic and productive one. The two fields often intersect in their use of storytelling, visualization, and critique. Literary works frequently inspire images, whether through illustrations, cover art, or cinematic adaptations. Additionally, literary theories, such as feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and psychoanalysis, have been influential in image studies. On the other hand, image studies have contributed to literary studies by broadening the scope of literary interpretation. Image studies recognize the significance of visual elements in literary texts and acknowledge that images are not confined to the realm of the visual arts. They have expanded the scope

of literary analysis to include illustrations, cover art, typography, and other visual elements.

Furthermore, literature and image studies have been mutually beneficial in their critiques. Image studies have been useful in exposing the ideologies and power relations operative in literary texts, while literary theory has helped to provide the language and concepts to analyze images critically.

3. Maugham's Representation of China and its Culture

3.1 Description of the Novel's Setting and Characters

3.1.1 Setting

The Painted Veil is as a matter of fact set in China during the 1920s. The novel is primarily set in the city of Mei-tan-fu in the province of Szechuan, which is described as a small, isolated, and remote town surrounded by mountains. The rural landscape and the isolation of the town create a sense of confinement and trapped emotions, which is reflected in the characters' experiences. The town is also characterized by its poverty and disease, providing the backdrop for Walter's work as a doctor. The city itself acts as a mix of Chinese and Western architecture, reflecting the tension between the two cultures that exists in the novel. The Chinese landscape and culture are also crucial to the setting of the novel, which explores the clashes between Western and Eastern cultures as well as the prejudices and stereotypes that exist on both sides. The novel also is based on the Chinese landscape as a metaphor for the characters' emotional journeys, with the mountains representing the obstacles that the characters must overcome in order to find inner peace and happiness.

3.1.2 Characters

Here comes to the analysis of Kitty Fane as the one of the leading character. Kitty Fane is the primary protagonist in the novel. She is a young, beautiful, and selfish woman who is bored with her routine life and eager to escape the confines of her marriage. She is initially portrayed as a shallow and frivolous character, obsessed with social status and material possessions. However, as the novel progresses, Kitty's character develops and she begins to demonstrate more depth and complexity. Kitty's journey towards self-discovery is a central thematic image of the novel, as she learns to value her own happiness and finds fulfillment in her work as a nurse during the cholera epidemic. Besides, she functions as the connection with the exotic world, especially China in view of the Chinese servants, as the concentrative representation of Chinese situation at that time through her own observation, which though is often interwoven with partial ideas. Also, she represents the advocated spirit of woman's independence.

Walter Fane comes next. As Kitty's husband and a talented doctor, he is initially portrayed as a reserved and emotionally detached character, focusing solely on his own profession. However, as the novel progresses, his character develops further and his portrait becomes more complexed. Walter's journey towards self-discovery is also a central theme of the novel, as he confronts his own personal demons and learns to open up emotionally. Walter's struggle to find happiness is reflected in his work as a

doctor, as he is faced with the devastating effects of the cholera epidemic. His image, portrayed to a greater extent, as the embodiment of the scientific spirit, majorly illustrates the rationality and reason.

3.2 Analysis of Maugham's Portrayal of Chinese People and Customs

Actually, Maugham's portrayal of Chinese people and customs reveals both his appreciation of Chinese culture and his European perspective. Maugham depicts Chinese people as polite, calm, and reserved individuals. He notes that Chinese "were polite to a degree that no European could understand" (Maugham, p. 10). This politeness is shown in the character of Mei-tan-fu, who remains calm even in the most difficult and severe situation. Moreover, Maugham portrays Chinese characters as being calm and self-composed. When Kitty and Walter meet for the first time, they note that "the Chinese [are] always so calm" (Maugham, p. 12). W. Somerset Maugham's novel, *The Painted Veil*, is set in China during the 1920s. Maugham's portrayal of Chinese people and customs reveals both his appreciation of Chinese culture and his European perspective.

Maugham depicts Chinese people as polite, calm, and reserved individuals. He notes that the Chinese "were polite to a degree that no European could understand" (Maugham, p. 10). This politeness is shown in the character of Mei-tan-fu, who remains calm even in the most difficult situations. This depiction can be seen as a reflection of the Confucian concept of "Li", which is not only about respect and politeness towards others, but also a norm and constraint of social behaviors.

Moreover, Maugham portrays the Chinese characters as being calm and self-composed. When Kitty and Walter meet for the first time, they note that "the Chinese [are] always so calm" (Maugham, p. 12). This calmness and self-composure can be seen as an embodiment of the Confucian doctrine of the "Doctrine of the Mean", which advocates for moderation in behavior and emotions, avoiding being too. Conclusively, while Maugham's portrayal is taken from a European perspective, his understanding and depicting of Chinese people and customs undeniably reflect the profound influence of Confucianism in Chinese culture. His novel provides a unique lens through which we can explore the intersection of Western and Eastern perspective, and the enduring influence of Confucianism on Chinese society.

Additionally, Maugham portrays the cultural practice of arranged marriages, which is evident in the character of Mei-tan-fu. However, Maugham's portrayal of Chinese people and customs is not without its limitations and prejudices. He tends to view Chinese culture as inferior to European culture. This is seen in Walter's dismissive attitude towards Waddington's appreciation of Chinese culture, which he views as backward and inferior. Maugham also portrays Chinese people as being overly superstitious, as evidenced by the character of Mother Superior, who believes in the power of omens and rituals. *The Painted Veil* provides a detailed portrayal of Chinese people and customs, revealing both Maugham's appreciation of Chinese culture and his European perspective. Through his portrayal of Chinese people, Maugham emphasizes their polite, calm, and reserved nature. Additionally, he highlights the importance of family values, tradition, and arranged marriages in Chinese culture. However, Maugham's portrayal of Chinese people is also limited by his European perspective and prejudices,

which sometimes view Chinese culture as inferior to European culture. This viewpoint can find its basis in Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism". In his work "Orientalism", Said elaborates on the Western stereotypes and misunderstandings of the East, arguing that these misunderstandings stem from the West's subjective imagination and stereotypes of the East, rather than the actual situation of the East. Maugham's portrayal may be a manifestation of this "Orientalism" concept, where he approaches from a European perspective, viewing Chinese culture as inferior to European culture. This viewpoint may not truly reflect the complexity and diversity of Chinese culture.

3.3 Examination of the Themes Related to Chinese Culture, such as Family Values and Honor

One of the key themes emerging in the novel is the value placed on family relationships in Chinese culture. Throughout the novel, we see example of this in the relationships between the Chinese characters, particularly the members of Mei-tan-fu's family. Mei-tan-fu, a high-ranking Chinese official with a dignified demeanor and traditional values, becomes romantically entangled with Kitty, a vivacious and curious English woman. His family, a complex tapestry of influential figures and traditional Chinese customs, plays a pivotal role in the narrative, influencing the course of events and shaping the emotional landscape of the story. Mei-tan-fu's sister, for example, is portrayed as a traditional Chinese woman who values family honor and serves as a mediator between Kitty and her brother. In addition to family values, the novel also explores the topic of honor in Chinese culture. Mei-tan-fu's sense of honor is particularly important to the story, as it affects how he interacts with Kitty and ultimately motivates his actions. As a high-ranking official, Mei-tan-fu is expected to uphold certain standards of behavior and adhere to strict codes of conduct. When he believes that his honor has been compromised, he feels compelled to take drastic measures to restore it.

Overall, *The Painted Veil* offers a nuanced portrayal of Chinese culture and the values that are important to its people. Through its exploration of family relationships and the concept of honor, the novel provides insight into the ways in which these values shape the behavior and motivations of the characters.

4. Comparison with Other Works of Maugham and other Authors

4.1 Comparison with Maugham's Other Works on Cultural Representation

Maugham's other works also explore cultural representation and the cultural differences between the East and the West in various settings. For example, in *Of Human Bondage*, Maugham explores how the protagonist, Philip Carey, tries to reconcile his sense of English identity with his fascination with Parisian culture. He shows how Philip's struggles with identity and belonging are shaped heavily by the cultural differences he encounters, thus echoing the themes found in *The Painted Veil*. Similarly, in *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham explores the cultural clash that takes place when an American man becomes fascinated with Eastern philosophy and religion. Through Larry Darrell's journey, Maugham explores the cultural differences between the East and the West and how those differences can be both

stimulating and challenging. The novel raises thought-provoking questions about the various traditions and beliefs found in different parts of the world and how individuals can find meaning in those traditions.

4.2 Comparison with Works by Other Authors Representing China and its Culture

Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* is also a typical example portraying Chinese culture. Set in early 20th Century China, this novel explores the lives of ordinary Chinese people from the perspective of a Chinese farmer and his family. Buck delves into themes such as the relationship between humans and the natural world, the importance of family ties, and the impact of modernization on traditional values. However, it is not denied that under Buck's pen, Chinese traditional woman is also armed with the typical American independent spirit. Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* is set in early 20th century China and it explores the lives and loves of Westerners living in China. It particularly examines the relationship between men and women in Chinese society, addressing themes such as gender roles, sexuality, and the influence of cultural and social norms on personal relationships.

By comparing *The Painted Veil* with those works summarized above, readers can gain a deeper understanding of China's complexity and its people at a particular historical period. While *The Painted Veil* primarily focuses on the experiences of Westerners in China, it also touches upon themes such as political unrest, personal turmoil, and the clash between Western and Chinese cultures, etc., thus all of which makes it a typical novelistic writing of China. Similarly, it can hardly convey a balanced impressionistic image of China, since Maugham's identity as an exotic writer, distinguished from Chinese native reality, necessarily bears with a strong sense of his own national characteristics. However, he also tries to present China to the world with his own careful observation.

One of the key themes of the novel lies in the clashes between Eastern and Western cultures. The protagonist, Kitty, is a typical Western woman who initially dismisses the values and traditions of the Chinese people. However, as she spends more time in China and learns about its culture and customs, she begins to appreciate and understand them. The novel also addresses the issue of imperialism and colonialism. It criticizes the Western attitude of superiority and the belief that Western values and ways of life are superior to those of other cultures. This is exemplified by the character of Walter Fane, a British doctor who serves as a reminder of the imperialist mindset that was prevalent during the time the novel was written.

Furthermore, the novel highlights the importance of empathy and understanding in cross-cultural interactions. Kitty's transformation from a prejudiced and ignorant Western woman to someone who values and respects Chinese culture is a testament to the transformative power of empathy and understanding. In terms of cultural representation, *The Painted Veil* challenges the Western tendency to exoticize and condescend to non-Western cultures. Instead of presenting China as a mysterious and exotic land, the novel provides a nuanced and respectful portrayal of its people and culture.

Overall, W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil* is a powerful and thought-provoking work that has important implications for literature and cultural representation. The novel challenges traditional Western attitudes and highlights the importance of empathy and understanding in cross-cultural interactions.

4.3 Discussion of the Similarities and Differences in the Representation of China and its Culture

The representation of China and its culture has undergone significant changes in literature and film throughout history. While there are similarities in emphasizing traditional practices and values, differences emerge in depicting modernity, political systems, and social issues. In literature, China is often portrayed as an ancient, mystical, and exotic land with a rich cultural heritage, characterized by values such as Confucian teachings, respect for elders, and the importance of the family. This depiction is evident in classical works such as *Journey to the West* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, emphasizing the importance of traditional values in Chinese society.

However, contemporary literary works delve into China's modernity and changes. For instance, writers like native writers with their works being translated to the world, like Mo Yan and Yan Lianke, tend to depict the contemporary urban life and raise issues related to urban migration, modernization, and governance in China in particular.

In the field of films, the representation of China and its culture has undergone a similar shift. Traditional Chinese art forms, such as martial arts and calligraphy, have often been used to depict Chinese identity in films. For example, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "House of Flying Daggers" feature elaborate fight scenes and traditional architecture, highlighting the martial skills as an overwhelming discipline of Chinese culture and arts, which thus attracts the Chinese obsessions all over the world. Nevertheless, recent films such as "Wolf Warrior 2", "Crazy Rich Asians", and "The Farewell" depict contemporary China, highlighting issues like economic development, modernization, and social changes. These recent films also showcase China's diversity and complexity, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging differences within a culture.

In summary, while traditional and modern representations of China and its culture emerge in both literature and film, the focus of these depictions and the issues raised differ. Literature often emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional values, while films tend to depict the changes and challenges of contemporary China. Nonetheless, both forms of art and storytelling offer a glimpse into China's cultural richness and complexities. The significance of this passage lies in illustrating how the portrayal of China and its culture has evolved over time in literature and film, reflecting the societal transitions and complexities within China. Additionally, it underscores the importance of understanding and depicting the diversity and complexity of a culture.

5. Conclusion

Maugham's representation of China and its culture in his works presents a somewhat stereotypical

perspective of the Chinese culture as exotic, mysterious, and enigmatic. He portrays the Chinese people as inscrutable and secretive, whose ways of thought and cultural practices are completely different from the Western culture. This representation is consistent with the Orientalist perspective popular in his time, which viewed the East as enigmatic and inferior to the West.

Maugham's depiction of China is often based on his personal experiences and observations of the country, which, despite its limitations, provides an intimate portrait of the country and its people. His works, such as *The Painted Veil* and *The Moon and Sixpence* are set in China, and they focus mainly on the interactions between Westerners and Chinese people. In his works, he highlights the clashes of cultures between the Western way of life and the Chinese, representing them as two inherently incompatible ways of living. While Maugham's work presents a somewhat distorted representation of Chinese culture, it is supposed to be noticed that he wrote from his own exotic perspectives and experiences, which were necessarily carved with his own native cultural imprints. Despite his limited angle of penetrating into Chinese culture, his works still provide insights into the country that remain relevant today.

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Note(s)

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