

A study on the Imagology of Tibetan People and Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon*

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ABSTRACT

“There is only one valley of Blue Moon, and those who expect to find another are asking too much of Nature” (Hilton 63). After the First World War in the 1930s, several war persecuted Europeans discovered the Shangri-La utopia in China. This essay uses imagology to analyze the foreign culture in *Lost Horizon* from both character and setting perspectives and the cultural conflicts of the Orient and the Occident. Written by James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* adequately illustrates the image of Tibet from a Western perspective of that era. Mystical Shangri-La is scenic and full of romantic fantasy, a symbol of peace and tranquility. Apart from the remarkable scenery, the book also contains inequalities between the social status of East and West, especially the prejudiced contempt and discrimination against the Chinese people in Tibetan areas. Lurking in the background are omnifarious ethnic, political and cultural conflicts and severe oppression. Behind the yearning for an Eastern land is the Eurocentrism, colonialism and racial superiority rooted in Western ethnicity.

Introduction

“There is only one valley of Blue Moon, and those who expect to find another are asking too much of Nature” (Hilton 63). After the First World War in the 1930s, several war persecuted Europeans discovered the Shangri-La utopia in China. This essay uses imagology to analyze the foreign culture in *Lost Horizon* from both character and setting perspectives and the cultural conflicts of the Orient and the Occident. Written by James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* adequately illustrates the image of Tibet from a Western perspective of that era. Mystical Shangri-La is scenic and full of romantic fantasy, a symbol of peace and tranquility. Apart from the remarkable scenery, the book also contains inequalities between the social status of East and West, especially the prejudiced contempt and discrimination against the Chinese people in Tibetan areas. Lurking in the background are omnifarious ethnic, political and cultural conflicts and severe oppression. Behind the yearning for an Eastern land is Eurocentrism, colonialism and racial superiority rooted in Western ethnicity.

Characters and Colonialism

The relationships of the characters in the book are profoundly unequal. Primarily, the relationship between the characters of the novel is one in which the Westerners are dominators, and the Easterners are followers. Tibetans are portrayed in the story as a group of silent, voiceless, and capricious people. They are willing to serve the governing class and have the characteristics of slaves. For instance, the relationship between the High Lama and the Tibetans is that of master and servant, “...in the valley which you have seen, and in which several thousand inhabitants are living under the control of our order” (Hilton 50). All the administrators at the top of Shangri-La society are people of European ancestry, such as the High Lama, who is of Luxembourgish descent, and he also claims “our best subjects, undoubtedly, are the Nordic and Latin races of Europe; perhaps the Americans would be equally adaptable” (Hilton 98). In other words, the Tibetans and Chinese could only undertake basic transportation and farming jobs and could

never participate in management positions. Even the knowledgeable and courteous Chang, well-versed in Eastern and Western cultures, is not qualified to inherit the Lama. Additionally, Hilton does not give Lo-Tsen, the ideal female character adored by Conway and Mallinson any direct portrayal in the whole book but always describes her through the observations of these two men. This character does embody the mystery of Shangri-La, but her Oriental race destroys her discourse power regrettably.

In *Lost Horizon*, the characterization is particularly influenced by Eurocentrism and colonialism. The Western-centrism sense of superiority in this book is noticeable in the description of the archetypal Chinese man, Chang is “grey-haired, clean-shaven, and rather pallidly decorative in a silk embroidered gown” (Hilton 39). This is a decent, tidy old Chinese man, and even more strikingly, “...is a Chinese who spoke perfect English and observed the social formalities of Bond Street amidst the wilds of Tibet” (Hilton 39). Chang undoubtedly possesses many virtues, and elegance is the most distinctive characteristic given to him by Hilton. However, even this charismatic Chang eventually has to pass the word between Conway and the High Lama, only because he is Chinese. On the other hand, Conway, the new habitant with British nationality, gets the High Lama’s favor. The difference between the status of East and West is perfectly expressed in the writer’s subconscious through these two characters. Additionally, Chang’s characterization embodies the idea of colonialism. In contrast to Hilton’s desire and expectation of a perfect utopian Shangri-La, his prejudice against the Asian foreign culture is persistent throughout the book. Chen-xi Hou comments, “Mr. Chang is described by the author as sophisticated and self-constraint, pedantic and hypocritical, a typical image of a deputy of profit fostered by foreign colonial powers” (Hou 54). Even if Chang is only an illusory character, the intense conflict generated by the disparity between Chinese and Western cultural perceptions should still be taken seriously.

The “Utopia of the 20th century”

One of the most popular parts of *Lost Horizon* for Westerners is the description of the “Utopia of the 20th century”, the isolated Shangri-La. Its natural landscape is the most splendidly, too vividly rendered in Tibetan grandeur to think Hilton never visited that mysterious place:

Conway could see the outline of a long valley, with rounded sad-looking hills on either side, not very high from where they rose, and jet-black against the deep electric blue of the night sky. But it was to the head of the valley that his eyes were led irresistibly, for there, soaring into the gap, and magnificent in the full shimmer of moonlight appeared what he took to be the loveliest mountain on earth. It was an almost perfect cone of snow, simple in outline as if a child had drawn it, and impossible to classify as to size, height, or nearness. It was so radiant, so serenely poised, that he wondered for a moment if it were real at all (Hilton 35).

After praising the spectacular scenery of Shangri-La, Conway also admires the valley’s political philosophy, as explained by Chang, “We rule with moderate strictness and in return we are satisfied with moderate obedience. And I think I can claim that our people are moderately sober, moderately chaste and moderately honest” (Hilton 50). This society is built around the Golden mean, contrasts with the Western industrial civilization with which protagonists are familiar and reflects Hilton’s understanding and aspiration for Eastern culture.

However, this utopia is also a backward political system in which religion and politics are merged with tightly controlled slaves. The Tibetans are governed by white men, while the High Lama is increasingly deified through his legends. Even when Conway, one of the heroes of the story and the symbol of perfection European, learns of the High Lama’s experience, he also cannot help but be “shaken with an emotion for which he knew no reason and which he did not seek to conceal” (Hilton 94). The monks who relied on religion to consolidate their dominance indulged in literary studies, “the serene purpose of Shangri-La could embrace an infinitude of odd and apparently trivial employments” (Hilton 121). Their knowledge, but indifference to social and scientific progress, combined with the background of authoritarian rule, led the young Mallinson to resist this inanimate environment and shouts, “We want to

return to civilization as soon as possible” (Hilton 40). The conflict around democracy and freedom is one of the main conflicts between East and West. On the other hand, Shangri-La fits the Western fantasy of the ideal colony. Its inhabitants were unemotional, unenlightened, ignorant, but rich in gold. In the book, Shangri-La has gradually formed a complete trade chain in one transaction with the outside world. In addition, with the backwardness and low productivity of Shangri-La’s native economy, Shangri-La would have been supposed to become an ideal colony (Chou 112). Nevertheless, most researchers and critics felt that Hilton had focused on glorifying this mysterious land, with Yan-ju Zhang even suggesting that Shangri-La could “explore the everlasting Orient Complex harbored by the Westerners” (Zhang 200). Perhaps it was Tibet’s remoteness and resistance to outsiders that contributed to its beautiful, pure image as a ‘utopia’, a spiritual bastion for readers of that era. However, this dream of Tibet was only possible because of its relatively unviolated by the British Empire. The Occident need to imagine a paradise where its target of progress is untainted.

Conclusion

Hilton was inspired by numerous travelogues, letters, memoirs and photographs. “The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1). From Hilton’s perspective, the tranquil and peaceful Shangri-La, untroubled by war and welcoming the war-scarred people of Europe, was the ideal place to live for the war-wounded people of that era. However, he only celebrates the environment of Shangri-La and the contribution of people of European descent to the creation of this society. Both the erudite Chang and the ordinary Tibetans become the service staff of the protagonist and the Caucasian. Hilton yearns for the environment of the East but despises Asian people as the underclass and ignorant slaves. *Lost Horizon* appears to be an aspiration of China, but in fact, it should be considered an ethnocentric novel.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lingnan University for establishing the course ENG3264 Asian Voices in English (Literature and Film), which gives me a precious opportunity to conduct this research. I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Barker in giving me honest and pertinent advice and pointing out areas of improvement in the article.

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