Rethinking Material Religion in the East: Orientalism and Religious Material Culture in Contemporary Western Academia

Xing Wang

University College, University of Oxford, OX1 4BH, UK; aaronwangx89@outlook.com

Abstract: This paper reviews the historical development of the modern discourse of "Orientalism" and the emergence of material culture as a self-reflexive theoretical transition in the West. Further, it investigates new types of Orientalism in the study of religious material culture. The traditional Orientalist approach to understanding foreign cultures has been abandoned in Western academia for decades owing to its moral judgment and lack of neutrality. However, an implicit form of Orientalism still exists in contemporary Western academia. Material culture appeared as a new trend in understanding the world as not solely dominated by human beings but also transformed by material objects. Religious material culture, far from explaining the reality of religious phenomena in different cultures, constructs new realities to solve problems in Western intellectual discourse. This is the case with the study of Chinese religions and material life.

Keywords: Orientalism; material culture; Chinese religion; material religion

1. Introduction

After decades of the extensive popularity of Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism*, disputes over the arrogance in traditional and early modern Western academia while representing the "oriental world" seem to have brought a humbler attitude in this intellectual circle towards understanding cultures outside the West. Said's thesis on Orientalism made Western academia painfully aware of its conscious and subconscious assumptions regarding the superiority of the Occident over the Orient during the final decades of the twentieth century, especially in discussions of the contrast between Christianity and Eastern religions. Although problematic, Said's work initiated a change of view in the observation and comprehension of the Orient in a post-colonial context. It forced scholars in the West to re-examine their biases toward and power relations with the East when studying cultures foreign to their own. Said's main focus was on Western constructions of the Orient in the context of Middle East studies, but his ideas have also been applied more widely to Western constructions of cultures in the Far East.

Nonetheless, it is sensible and reasonable for one to ask whether we are indeed stepping away from imperial Orientalism. Representations of the East today are a consequence of a more neutral and less exotic perception of it. Scholars in the West have attempted to use the East to modify the ostensibly consistent but essentially ambivalent knowledge system in the West, especially in the sphere of comparative studies and religious studies. However, I shall argue that such efforts, in fact, create a new kind of "Orientalism" in which philosophical as well as cosmological concepts are flattened and regarded as the solution for the problems in Western epistemology. Specifically, in the new academic trend of "Material Culture" in the West over the past decade, a new type of Orientalism is seen behind the agenda of explaining the world in a more nuanced, indifferent, and diverse manner. This new type of "Orientalism" creates a new image of the East and cultures outside the Christian Anglo-American context, not as something inferior to the West like in the case of traditional Orientalism, but as challenging and provoking the intellectual framework of the West. This new way of understanding

the East, again, does not represent what the East "should be like," but gives birth to an understanding of the East as what it "should be like in the new Western narrative." This article reveals this kind of Orientalism by reviewing Said's ideas on Orientalism and the works and theories pertaining to material culture in contemporary Western religious studies, especially those dealing with Chinese religions. Anthropological, philosophical, and historical studies on this matter have been analyzed based on how they use the East (in this article, China) as a reflexive tool for solving the theoretical as well as intellectual dilemmas of the West.

2. Orientalism: Mirroring and Understanding

Coincidentally, in the 1970s, two types of controversial ideas that revealed the inevitable human nature of self-reflection emerged in Paris and New York. In Paris, Jacques Lacan brought new controversies and disputes to the field of psychology and cognitive philosophy by proposing his theories on the nature of human behavior and cognition as a process of "mirroring" (Gutting 2001; Lacan [1969] 2007). From a psychoanalytic perspective, he tried to demonstrate that a person's idea of the self is gained through the recognition of one's own image in a mirror, and this mirror image turns one's self into an object of observation. In this manner, the mirror stage of a person simultaneously produces images of others in contrast to one's self; what is not part of the image of the self must be "others". According to Lacan, it is human nature to comprehend things, objects, and people in relation to a person's self. People's understandings of "others" are only mirror images, or reflections of their understandings of themselves. Derived from Saussure's structural linguistics and Freudianism, this theory was also widely used for analyzing the construction of cultural identity and gender roles in certain socio-political contexts (Inoue 2006). In New York, Edward Said proposed a similar idea regarding the inescapable human nature of self-reflection and mirrored autonomy but instead of analyzing individual psychology, he targeted the Western Orientalist scholarship.

Inspired by the philosophies of Foucault, Vico, Antonio Gramsci, and his own experiences in literary criticism, Said realized that there was a kind of representation of the Orient in fictional as well as scholarly literature on the pre- and early modern Western world. By the Orient, he was largely referring to the Middle East and Islamic world, but he implied that this was also the case with the representation of the Far East (Said 1978). Said argued that the way in which Western intellectuals depicted the East was by treating it as a phenomenon, an object, that did not stand on its own, instead existing only for Western academia—in this sense, making it a mirror of the West. In many writings, as Said pointed out, Western authors consciously and subconsciously interpreted the East in accordance with their imperialist interests. Thus, the real cause of their interest in the East was not to understand the East for its own sake, but to transform it into a mirror of Western culture. In such an interpretation, scholarly works were as fictional as literary works, even though they were often labeled as truth-telling. This kind of "literariness" hidden in "credible" academia created a range of illusions about the East and codified this knowledge with the cloaked this knowledge with academic respectability (Elmarsafy et al. 2013).

Said also pointed out that this kind of knowledge, although entangled with Darwinism, imperialism, and geopolitics, was a variation of the Orientalism that had existed since the Hellenistic age. Cartledge (1993) shows how the ancient Greek way of describing history was often disguised in a manner of "telling historical facts" but was expressed through a strong "Greek" perspective. This means that the Greeks always had an awareness of the distinction between the Greek "us" and the barbaric "others". The whole context of writing the histories of the "others" was rooted in the agenda of defining who the Greeks were, and this is reflected in Greek writings about the history of the East, especially the Persian and Egyptian empires (Dossa 1987). This antithesis between the civilized "us" and the barbaric "Orient" generated the classical form of Orientalism that lasted until the early modern period in Europe. Particularly, the catalysts for the emergence of the Orientalism that Said dealt with were related to the rise and fall of the Persian and Ottoman empires. In a series of rises and falls of Oriental empires, Said pointed out that the unstable relationship between Europe and the East

led European intellectuals to draw clear boundaries between them and their neighbors, not only in terms of geographical distinctions but also with regard to formulating differences in their own cultural identities (Said 1978). It was in the early age of the modern Western empires, he argued, that the allocation of power between the West and its Oriental colonies transformed this sensitive interpretation into a form of codified knowledge about the East. The seemingly truthful knowledge provided by the Western Orientalist scholarship, according to Said, is not genuinely about the Orient, but about the West itself. Therefore, Said boldly announced that such a kind of so-called neutral scholarship is essentially "political".

It is generally believed that this explicit form of Orientalism has gradually been abandoned in the past decades in Western academia, especially under the influence of post-colonial theories, yet a continuous imperial gaze toward the East still exists in an implicit manner (Nicha 2012). Of course, we hardly see any academic works or claims that explicitly antagonize the West and East or put them into simple binary comparisons, as was the case with the classical form of Orientalism—exaggerating the differences between the East and West and making moral judgments. A more politicized culturalism is colored by discourses such as modernity in the East, academic neutrality, and cultural essentialism (Paramore 2016). By "neutrally understanding the East," Western academia still needs to apply its academic framework to cultures in the East and analyze them based on new developments and trends in the West. Thus, what is highlighted in these representations of the East, although less politically inferior and simplistic, is a complex "mirror" reflecting the Western academia and intellectual world's own enquiries of their discourse. This can even be seen in contemporary academic discourses in East Asian countries for understanding their own past before high modernity. One of the examples is the school of New Qing History at Harvard University, which tried to redefine the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) in China, not as part of Chinese society but as a global dynasty with traits homogenous to the rest of the Sinic dynasties (Rawski 1996). However, advocates of this school of thought have been strongly criticized by scholars in Europe, America, and China, as an Orientalist endeavor that imposes the new Western academic trend of globalism onto Chinese history ignores obvious textual facts that are vital to the study of this period in China (Ding and Ou 2013). Here, we are facing a "neo-Orientalism" where the East is not despised, distorted, or flattened anymore, but multifaceted, nuanced, and complicated. The East has been depicted in recent Western academia as something standing "outside" the old imperial framework. Nonetheless, this intentional complication of the East is a result of the shift of Western intellectual discourse, and a "multi-faceted" East is highlighted and even exaggerated by this post-colonial context—a neo-Orientalism.

3. New Interest in the Material World in Western Academia

A new academic field called "Material Culture" has emerged in the past few decades in Western academia, along with further developments and transformations of Orientalism. Interests in understanding the material world and human-object relations resulted in a booming field of theorizing and conceptualizing "the material" in contemporary social, cultural, and philosophical theories. Pierre (Bourdieu [1979] 1987) was perhaps the first person who stressed the importance of the human material life in understanding processes of social stratification and classification. He argued that people's various tastes in material objects and ways of dealing with them based on their different social stations transformed material objects into "cultural/symbolic capital" that reinforced the social differences between different classes. Alfred Gell (1998) developed this idea of the cultural/symbolic functions of material objects and pointed out that material objects, especially artworks and religious idols, played an important role in inter-human communications. They have a kind of "agency" constructed by the human beings who made these objects. In this sense, the material object can "act" and have influence on people's social life. Such a theoretical interest in the relationship between material objects and culture was also influenced by modern archaeology, which has long been regarded as a discipline that recreates cultures of past civilizations and antiquity from a scrutiny of excavated

material objects (Patnaik 1995). This means that archaeology is often practiced as an imperial enterprise with a strong and explicit "Orientalist" agenda by Western scholars (Hull 2014).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology also initiated an ongoing discussion on the relationship between the human body and the material world. A typical Merleau-Pontian approach considers the human body as the foundation of human existence and the most important and effective medium of social interaction. The body and human bodily experiences are seen as the most crucial medium for the cognitive process (Merleau-Ponty 2002). This implies that the production of philosophy, construction of concepts, and culture itself in human society are physical and experiential (Tilley 2004). Because of this, intellectuals cannot be oblivious to the role of material objects and their power in making sense of human beings' mental as well as physical existence. Although physical experiences and different cultural perceptions of the material world are subjective and individualistic, the process of understanding the world through the body itself is universal. Such an idea stimulated numerous new fields in Western academia to re-evaluate previous epistemology and the contradictions between objectivity and subjectivity in the philosophy of science, materialism, and culture.

Current scholarship on material culture contains two different types of understandings of the human-material object relationship. One is to see material objects as constructed by human beings and "socialized" in their interactions with the human world, and this was developed from Gell's theory of constructed agency in material objects. This view treats human agency as the provenance of the power of material objects in changing human social life and makes material objects the blank "canvas" for cultural constructions (Miller 2005). Despite its stress upon the role of material objects in human life, this view still restricts material objects to being the recipient of human influences. Thus, objects can only be understood as completely socialized, culturalized, and even moralized (Arjun [1986] 2012). The other understanding defines material objects as autonomous, agentic, and active entities on their own, transforming the human society and mind constantly with their own power (Boivin 2008). In other words, material objects make up human mind, behavior, and culture while receiving human constructions and modifications. Thus, human beings and material objects constantly exist in mutual influence and association. The French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour proposes the idea that human beings and material objects are widely associated with each other, and it is impossible to distinguish who is the object and who is the subject in such a relationship (Latour 2010). Based on his comparative studies of African indigenous religions and modern European/Christian iconoclastic culture, Latour argues that modern secular society is not very far from the traditional one where religious life dominated everything. Both religion and modern economy are different types of "social networks" within which human beings and the rest of the material world are connected. The entire trend of material culture is a reform to the Western epistemological as well as theoretical frameworks, effecting a turn from human beings and the human mind to their mirror image—the material world. Observations of other cultural and social phenomena outside the West are used as evidence to fit within this reform of intellectual discourse.

4. Material Religion: "Neo-Orientalism"

Although one may say that traditional Orientalism, namely the belief in the superiority of the West and an illusive perception of the East in Western Orientalist scholarship, has been corrected, this is not the end of the story. By rethinking the Orient (if such a definition really exists) and redefining the Occident in recent years, a new form of Orientalism has arisen and developed along with the transition of Orientalist scholarship in the West to a more "humble" and ostensibly "realistic" view. In many cases, exotic cultures and philosophies are taken as a convenient and quick solution or explanation for the contradictions of questionable concepts in Western culture, such as those between culture and nature, personhood and materiality, and so on. The cost of this is that the world is often depicted with several independent and "monolithic" civilizations, with each representing a conspicuously featured and coherent cultural system. One of the most famous works representing this pluralism is Samuel Phillips Huntington's (Huntington [1996] 2002) book *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which the ancient

world is described as a ferocious battlefield nourished by the conflicts between various cultures. This pluralism, which at first glance leaves people with the impression of advocating cultural diversity, actually denies the simple fact that there are always contradictions, conflicts, and incoherence in any culture. Moreover, different cultural systems have always communicated with and influenced each other, sometimes even constituting each other.

Many scholars have attempted to use the East as an intellectual Eden, a Utopia where the gaps and contradictions existing in Western epistemology have already been reconciled or never existed in the first place. Although romanticizing the East is not a new phenomenon, this kind of romanticization is sometimes disguised as "an alternative thinking pattern" nowadays. Numerous reductionist interpretations are created for this purpose in material culture. One of the works by the French sinologist François Jullien (1995) on the Chinese word *shi* 勢, which can be translated as the configuration of things or propensity of objects and life, has shown such an inclination. In this book, translated from French as *The Propensity of Things: Toward a history of efficacy in China*, he depicts the idea of propensity in ancient Chinese philosophy and religion as the reconciliation between the dynamic and the static, form and substance, life and non-life, word and picture, manipulation and legitimated power, and spirituality and materiality. He argues that the concept of *shi*, which is used to describe the configurations of an army in a battlefield, superior and inferior political influences, gestures of the body, fluctuations of landscapes, styles of calligraphy, visual art and literature, and the movement of history, represents a perfect methodology for Western thinkers to deal with the rifts between contradictory concepts in their culture. He constantly reminds his readers that the Chinese culture emphasizes the homogeneity of different things—the potentiality and relationality of oppositions—which have the potential to challenge some Western categories that have served as a basis for Western thought but have now ceased to be relevant. He believes that by examining the etymological development of the word *shi* in Chinese material culture, Western scholars will become aware of a certain prejudice in Western philosophy, whose "traditional" nature, now seen from the outside, will also appear more marked by contrast. For this purpose, Jullien describes *shi* as a monolithic concept that subsumes every aspect of ancient Chinese social and cultural life into a singular concept. He sees *shi* as an internally coherent concept that shapes the unique Chinese way of thinking in contrast with the Western one. Not only does he presume that the semantic field of this one single character in Chinese has remained stable and intact, but he also tries to wield and fuse various kinds of the word's usage into one well-integrated philosophical term. Subsequently, some anthropologists have borrowed this "fascinating and innovative" conception to build a frame to explain the ineffable feeling one encounters in the material world (Miller 2008).

Such an idealization of the exotic culture is just like what I intend to define as "neo-Orientalism". For many scholars, both the East and the West are internally consistent and independent cultural systems that are immersed in a kind of holistic culture where society can be regarded as an internally coherent and segregated whole. However, as Holbraad (2010) puts it, this kind of holism is actually "a reduction of the plentitude of the world—a summary of its most important parts" (p. 70) and ignores the volatile and unstable aspects of human culture. With a close inspection of the development of the theories and knowledge of the material world in the West, one can easily see that they are far from being unanimous and coherent. Argument and disagreement persist over what exactly is "material" in the Western context (Ingold 2011), not to mention that regarding imposing the concept of "material" onto other cultural contexts. Without recognizing the diversity and complexity of one culture, how can we move to another to understand both? Therefore, we are on the one hand repudiating the "smug Orientalism", while on the other hand, falling into a "humble Orientalism". Or probably even beyond the simple geographical differentiation, it is, in general, a "humble exoticism". This type of Orientalism is different from its predecessor, as it embraces and accepts cultural differences as such and tries to neutrally represent different cultures in Western social discourse and intellectual framework. However, it is still a power relation, an imposition of adjusted Western cultural categories onto the East.

Another example is Mayfair Yang's (2000) study of the "Burning Paper Money" (*shao zhiqian*) funeral rituals in southern China from the perspective of "ritual economy". Yang proposes that offering deceased ancestors burned fake money to gain ancestral blessings in Chinese funeral culture is a form of hybridity between the local economy and Western capitalist values that go beyond the simplistic and monolithic power of "capitalism", as she discovered in Wenzhou, China. Indeed, provided that the quintessential capitalist norms are rational consumption and the maximization of profit, which lay stress upon materialism and utilitarianism, the ancestral sacrifice of burning money is ostensibly ritualistic and relatively "irrational." What Yang calls "economic hybridity" is a form of economy or, since she borrows Baudrillard's critique and seperates consumption from capitalism, a form of consumption that infiltrates into other social spheres and institutions, into irrational and illogical ritual life. These rituals, in turn, are infiltrated by social forces; in other words, consumption coexists with others, with religion and rituals. Yang says:

> In organic hybridization the crossing of two breeds, strains, or varieties of animal or plant species or of two different species or even genera results in the diversification of organic forms. Hybrids embody certain traits of both parents, enhancing some and erasing others. Since "hybridization" gets at the mutual incorporation of difference internally, it can be a useful metaphor for understanding certain processes of economic encounters. However, organic hybridization presupposes a smooth and unproblematic blending of traits and does not encapsulate the contested and agonistic features of the process of combination. (Yang 2000, p. 485)

What Yang is trying to show here is a theoretical challenge to Western capitalist ideology and an ethnographic alternative to the idealist understanding of the Western society as profit-oriented, secular, and less ritualistic. Nonetheless, neither is this a true representation of the Western society nor is it a precise depiction of the "foreign alternative" she proposes. Despite an Anglo-American capitalist ideology, economic and material life in Western society is highly ritualistic, "non-Western", and fluid (Arjun 2013). This framework of hybridity, which suggests that the ritual of burning money is a result of the indigenous Chinese funeral culture meeting Western capitalist invasion, is not valid for explaining a ritual sacrifice that has existed for centuries before the systematic encounters between China and the West (Wu 2012). Such an understanding of material culture in Chinese religion again shows the authors' agenda that does not aim to explain the targeted cultural phenomenon for its own sake, but to renew theories in Western academic discourse. This means that although the East is no longer depicted as somewhat inferior and "barbaric", it is still constructed as an image of the West. This relativism means that the East is nuanced and complicated in accordance with the complications with the Western lens used to observe it.

Furthermore, it is problematic to equate the Anglo-American concept of "material" with any ostensibly similar concepts in other cultures in the first place. Material objects are understood in the Euro-American academic context as initially external to the human world and then incorporated into society (Dant 1999). This means that the studies and conceptualization of material objects in the field of material culture are rooted in a presumption that material objects have always been innately heterogeneous to human life. Because they are external to human beings, odd and inanimate, they can be the subject of human perception. Thus, the idea of "materiality" indicates that the material features of objects are different and separated from their social existence (Ingold 2011). This "cult" of material culture, as Insoll (2009) suggests, is not restricted to some objective entities lying in the material world, which can be understood as a "universal common ground" for human existence, but a symbolic and reflexive theoretical tool constructed by Western scholars. Then, the questions arises whether it is valid to essentialize diverse cultural, and especially religious, phenomena through the perspective of material culture. One of the examples is the Chinese concept of *wu*, which is often translated and conceptualized in the English context as "material". But the Chinese semantic, as well as philosophical context of this term, is rather different from what scholars have taken for granted.

In the early etymological work *Discussing Words and Dissecting Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi*) (60–122) written by Shen Xu (1963), the explanation of this character is as follows:

> *Wu*: [It means] the myriad of beings (*wanwu*). The ox is a big being. The numbers of heaven and earth are started by leading an ox. Thus the character follows the radical ox, *niu*. (p. 30)

Roel Sterckx (2002) points out that the explanation in *Shuowen jiezi* draws an analogy between the concept of *wu* as "the denominator of indeterminate 'things' and the physicality of an ox, encompassing and big in size" (p. 17). He also notices that the astrological aspect of "leading an ox" is compared with the meaning of *wu* as "phenomena" in general. Perhaps Xu Shen's conceptualization of *wu* was derived from much earlier uses of the term to refer to the animals sacrificed in ancestral worship and shamanic rituals. The Qing scholar Duan (1981), in his commentary on the *Shuowen*, points out that what Xu Shen meant by "leading an ox" was probably not an actual ox but the constellation the Ox (*niu*) in the sky as the first star sign in the new year according to the Zhou calendar, which might be related to the worship of the ox. This commentary on *wu* as "the myriad of beings" obviously incorporates entities and phenomena in the material world, regardless of whether it is in the natural or social sphere, in this one single character. A similar interpretation can be found in the chapter "The Achievement of Life" (*Dasheng*) in the *Zhuangzi*: "What is *wu* is what has an appearance, image, sound and color." (Zhuang 1993, p. 114) Moreover, in a later linguistic book called *The Jade Chapters* (*Yupian*) (519–581) compiled by Yewang Gu (1983), the character *wu* is defined as everything that exists between heaven and earth.

These interpretations of the character *wu*, or "object," show that as opposed to certain types of received perceptions of nature and the material world, the early Chinese concept of the object referred to all kinds of different things, beings, and phenomena without distinguishing between the animate and inanimate. We can probably conclude that on a semantic level, the range of *wu* is closer to the idea of the environment. Everything surrounding a human being can be referred to as *wu*. This view also suggests that regarding *wu*, ostensibly static and fixed "material" objects, seemingly activated and animated objects, and phenomena in motion are the same in their fundamental nature. Again in both the philosophical texts *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, a transformed version of *wu*, called *hua*, is mentioned, indicating that the myriad phenomena in this world are undergoing incessant transformations. According to these texts, a sage king should always be able to capture and maintain the principles of such a transformation—the Way (*dao*) as the supreme essence in Chinese cosmology (Lao 1993; Zhuang 1993). All the *wu* in this material world have a kind of interchangeability and are innately linked by *qi*, which functions as the tangible mediator as well as the fundamental material from which the world has been created. *Qi* is pivotal in this transformation since it is the change of *qi* that transforms one object into another (Lin 2009).

Another salient and important aspect of the notion of *wu* lies in the visibility of the so-called "material world," its ability to be seen by human beings. In other words, whether an object can be called *wu* in this context depends on its potential to be seen by human beings, and the nature of human beings and of *wu* are always seen as reflections of one another. This idea is present in a historical record preserved in *Zuozhuan*, dated to 722 BC. It is entitled "Count Zangxi Remonstrating on Seeing Fish" (*Zangxibo jian guanyu*). In this text, Count Zangxi warned the king that it was his duty to collect physical objects only to reveal their expressions (*yizhang wucai*) (Zuo 1981). This duty of the king is also called "to *wu*" and is a vital component of maintaining appropriate social as well as cosmological order according to the text. Youguang Li (2010) argues that from the philosophy of *wu* from the time of the Guodian Warring States (476–221BC) bamboo strips, early Chinese thinking has stressed the visibility of *wu* as the revelation of the world to human beings, and this connotation of *wu* is inherited. Similar ideas can also be found in Zhu Xi's philosophy in the Song dynasty (960–1279).

For a long time in Western academia, this kind of thinking has been labeled as "animism" in the East and Africa and understood as a mirror image to the material culture in the West that regards objects as inanimate. It is widely accepted that the dichotomy between animate and inanimate objects in human cognition, if not directly derived from the anthropological theory of "animism," is strongly

influenced by it. The initial discussion and definition of the term "animism," proposed by E. B. Tylor in the late 19th century, have long been criticized as a reductionist and simplistic way to analyze the prevalent animism in traditional societies outside the Western world. By treating this animism as a "primitive" logic, Tylor (Tylor [1871] 2010) set up a clear boundary between the modern and the "primitive" way of thinking. He believed that distinguishing between animate and inanimate objects in the modern brain is the result of evolution; whereas, in traditional societies, the human spirit is believed to be capable of possessing material things and gaining animate power. The fundamental logic of his theory on animism has been attacked by many scholars since, and thereupon emerged a perspective where animism was viewed as an alternative way of thinking rather than a phase of evolution, allowing human beings to construct a social relationship between people, society, and the material world (Bird-David 1999).

John Kieschnick (2003) points out that in the Chinese context, regardless of what people called it, this kind of "animism," especially in relation to Chinese Buddhism, is indeed a matter of the "perception" rather than an undeveloped mentality. That is to say, the animist way of thinking will not necessarily evolve into the Western sense of a scientific thinking, and its validity mainly lies in the indigenous people's sensible logic derived from their observation and comprehension of things. What is pertinent here, despite the complexity of animism, is that the category of "inanimate objects" in this section refers to a type of things that are inorganic, inanimate only in the modern mind, and that this term has been adopted merely for the sake of cultural translation. However, it lies in exact contrast to the conceptualization of inanimate objects in the modern mind. In the Chinese physiognomy of inanimate objects, material things in particular, these objects are considered animate, and even anthropomorphic. Therefore, what modern scholars call "material" in different cultures is far from the reality of "material culture" in different social as well as cultural contexts, since the Western concept of "material" may not even exist. The cosmological variations in understanding human realities in different geo-cultural regions imply that even the fundamental cognitive tools for a specific society or social community are not translatable to another. The Chinese idea of *wu* includes both animate and inanimate objects, and natural as well as social phenomena, whereas the Anglo-American concept of "material" is more limited to inanimate and static things external to the human society. By making sense of other cultures within the Western framework, the "other" cultures are represented as a self-reflexive tool for highly politicized agendas.

Another issue related to the extant Orientalism in Chinese studies is Asian societies'—such as China's—own modernity. Arif Dirlik (Dirlik 1996) has already pointed out that the result of the frequent and extensive communications of Asian/Chinese intellectuals with Euro-American scholars in the modern day is that Chinese intellectuals acquire Euro-American ideas and conceptual frameworks to essentialize the so-called "cultural characteristics" of China. There is clearly a power play in the production of this kind of knowledge, in that indigenous scholars explicitly embrace the more "superior" cultural categories of the West and try to represent their cultural reality in the same manner, a reality that only makes sense in the Euro-American framework. Because of this, even an enterprise of explaining Chinese culture neutrally is suspicious, since this neutrality is constructed within a new form of Orientalism, which imposes the Euro-American academic discourse onto the cultural "others". Daniel Vukovich (Vukovich 2013) vividly shows how Chinese scholars were biased while writing the history of Mao's era because of their adoption of Western knowledge of state and politics. Therefore, we have to be conscious that the classical form of Orientalism has changed. It is no longer about distinguishing "us" and "other" in a simplistic manner, but about relativizing and universalizing the cultural "others" at the same time, which stems out of wanting to adjust to the academic, intellectual, and ideological discourse in the West. Moreover, this new form of Orientalist academia has begun to be adopted and institutionalized by indigenous scholars and intellectuals outside the West, resulting in a global consensus regarding the frameworks for understanding cultures.

5. Beyond Orientalism or Just a Matter of Cultural Translation

As Lloyd (2007) puts it, there has been a conventional "misinterpretation" in the way Western academia represents other cultures and relates them to the West. This convention is not simply reflected in the misunderstandings and mistranslations of different terms and words but lies in the ignorance of the underlying differences and incompatibilities of different cosmologies and ways of thinking. The enterprise of "cultural translation" requires more than simply equating Western concepts with those deemed as "similar" in other cultures or simply illustrating how they are different to the West on a superfluous level. Translation between cultures needs to be more nuanced and discreet. On the one hand, this means that calling two cultural phenomena or concepts "similar" or "pertinent" means that they have to be homogeneous on a meta-conceptual level in order to be juxtaposed as similar. On the other hand, stating that two concepts or phenomena are "different" also requires a more complex justification that this kind of difference does not arise from the process of mirroring the West in a flattening and demeaning way. Otherwise, it is only a hegemonic way of differentiating between human beings. Amy Li (Li 2015) suggests that translations between cultures, especially those between different cosmological as well as religious texts, should be based on the premise that any translation is a form of creation. In this sense, more academic attention is required regarding what academia itself has created while translating and understanding different cultures and societies and how this has been accomplished.

In other words, academic neutrality itself is a problematic stance that calls for adjustment. As a reaction to conventional Orientalism, a more politically "neutral" perspective became prevalent in contemporary Western academia in interpreting cultures. But this neutral perspective itself is a political reaction to the explicit Orientalist as well as colonialist scholarship. Because of Western world's new post-colonial and post-imperial social context, Western academic descriptions of the East and other foreign cultures become more and more sensitive toward a deprecating and simplifying tone. Yet such a sensitivity does not make contemporary Western academia more "neutral" and less self-centered. For example, the field of material culture itself is a strategy for giving credit and importance to the previously ignored and inferior subject in Western academia—the material world and material objects. This tallies with the overall academic trend in recent decades to rediscover the ignored and degraded subjects in the Western imperial academia. Thus, many new subjects and theoretical frameworks have been highlighted and even constructed not based on a "neutral" observation of the East or any other culture, but purposefully selected cultures based on new cultural categories created in the West.

Following this logic, one can conclude that Orientalism is the result of ignoring an epistemological paradox (or limit): Can we really know others without being too conscious of ourselves? Following the logic mentioned above, the solution should never be eliminating subjectivity in understanding other cultures because it can never be eliminated, nor should it be the continuation of such a prejudice. Acknowledging the subjectivity of understanding the West and the East and the element of subjective creation might be a start. Focusing on what has been created and Western academic discourse's own self-reflexive constructions, comparative studies between the East and West in Western academia should begin with a renewed understanding of the West itself. Being aware of the political stances Western academia takes means that one should always be aware of the transformative power of academic interpretations of cultures. In other words, academia itself is a "culture in practice," and as Sahlins (2005) argues, this creates new conditions for human existence. Nowadays, Western academia constantly stresses upon the importance of representing the "true" face of different cultures and societies, treating all cultures as morally equal, and constantly adjusting its approaches according to new situations. Yet even though this change of attitude helps people recognize the subjectivity in scholarly observations of cultures, it is still ignorant of the power relations between the West and the other. In a "Foucaultian" sense, the production of knowledge is simultaneously the production of power, and being academically neutral and "objective" is still a denial of the self-empowering process of knowledge production in Western academia. Thus, subjectivity is not the cause of bias, but power is (Foucault [1977] 1980). Therefore, the core question for Foucault is not the relativity of a statement

or a form of knowledge, but what governs this relativity. In this sense, power is only responsible for itself, and an "objective" statement only answers to power, not its subjects of observation. In contrast, in Edward Said's (Said 1981) final chapter in *Covering Islam*, he suggests that all interpreters of culture should be aware that they are not only responsible for themselves and their own culture but should also be ready to respond to the "others".

Particularly in the case of religious studies, religion is still regarded as an autonomous, distinctive, and institutional entity in most academic writings in the West today. Nonetheless, Latour (2002) has pointed out that this modernist ideal in religious scholarship should be called into question since even what was called "religion" or "God" in traditional European society was actually something more pervasive, interdependent, and all-encompassing. What we call "God" today refers to the Judo-European deity materialized in a Christian church, and what a medieval priest called "God" refers to a theological as well as a cosmological concept of the superior existence. This is an imposition of the modern assumptions of Europe's own religious history, a scheme of power that creates a superiority of the modern over the past. The nuances of different meanings of "God" in different periods are incapable of producing biases on their own, but the political preferences for different meanings can do so under the pretense of representing reality. Thus, before we translate religions in different societies, we have to translate "religion" itself more subtly and complexly. These explanations of one's stances are always required before an actual comparison is undertaken. Otherwise, one is only creating more misleading categories that, to some extent, fictionalize culture. Here, the approach is that, instead of only monotonously supporting one view over another or criticizing what has been regarded "wrong" in the mainstream intellectual discourse, we should be able to see the lineage of knowledge production and respond to whoever tries to investigate such a lineage. It is this awareness of the complete picture of the historical as well as contextual background of concepts, culture, and knowledge that enables a truly nuanced comparison between different societies.

6. Conclusions

Translations between concepts and cultures have always been a difficult enterprise. In the past decades, the East was described, understood, and analyzed by Western academia and intellectual discourse as a flat image of the West, a mirror of Western civilization, and an exotic and inferior object. Since Edward Said, this view has gradually been abandoned and replaced by a post-colonial approach. The East and the rest of the cultures outside the West should be understood neutrally and depicted according to their own realities. Yet in this revision of the approach, there is a continuing "Orientalism" that complicates the East, not for its own sake, but to reflect changes in Western intellectual discourse. This is particularly reflected in the trend of material culture in the West, which is often seen as an important intellectual transition from humanism to its opposite—the material world. However, taking a close look at a case of material culture research—material culture in Chinese religion—we can see that Western intellectual observation of "material religion" in China is actually an academic construction for its own agenda. Thus, Orientalism has persisted in some parts of contemporary Western academia and requires further investigation. Translating concepts and cultural phenomena across societies and regions requires an awareness of the subjectivity and political creation always present in this enterprise along with treating them as a form of "culture in practice". New conditions and ideas are created in the process of translating one thing to another, and this is rooted in the differences in human epistemology. We cannot completely avoid subjectivity, and nor should we, but we can always be aware of what is still not sufficient.

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