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**A Cross Cultural Interpretation and Semiotic Analysis of the Stereotypical
Visual Material Contains Slant-eyed Imagery Produced by the Contemporary
Western Fashion Industry**

**A Dissection of a Photograph Displayed at ART'N DIOR Exhibition in the year 2021 in
Shanghai**

**A Master's Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual
Culture**

Xiadi Mao

Division of Art History and Visual Studies

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences Lund University

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Supervisor: Ludwig Qvarnström

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, by using visual analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis to comprehend and explain mainly a controversial photograph, shot by a world-renowned Chinese visual artist named Chen Man, containing slant-eyed imagery which was displayed at ART’N DIOR Exhibition in Shanghai from November 12 to 23, 2021, reveals the practices of the contemporary Western fashion industry overzealously depicting Asian figures with a genre that slanted eyes are one of the key components in their promotional and advertising materials. This article then demonstrates how the stereotypical slant-eyed imagery associated with Asian people when it comes to their appearances could be understood in varied cultural perspectives, to be more exact, a generic cultural sphere of East against West paradigm in which this kind of imagery is of drastic different symbolic meanings and myths throughout changed historical context. Following this analytical process driven by Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory is a discussion regarding how such a supposed genre of ought-to-be racially disparaging imagery containing Asian figures with slanted eyes has been created, solidified, and normalised by the Western fashion industry as the signifier of imagined oriental exoticism reinforcing the institutional Western-centrism through the perspective of discourse, the cultural phenomenon reflecting societal power structures proposed by Michel Foucault, among the global society. The conclusion drawn from these case studies and analysis in this thesis is that the slant-eyed imagery described in the article clearly exemplifies the cultural aspect of postcolonialism in which the Western culture maintains an influential, dominating, even oppressing position over other cultures.

Keywords: Fashion, Semiotics, Myth, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Racism, Discourse, Western-centrism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
LIST OF FIGURES	5
INTRODUCTION	6
AIM & RESEARCH QUESTIONS	6
BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE	10
EMPIRICAL MATERIAL	13
THEORY AND METHOD	15
PREVIOUS RESEARCH	18
DISPOSITION	19
CHAPTER 1: WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT	21
1.1 An Overall Description.....	21
1.2 Taking apart the Image.....	25
1.3 Experiencing the Image as a Whole.....	26
1.4 Summary.....	28
CHAPTER 2: LOOKING AT THE IMAGE AGAIN VIA SEMIOTICS	29
2.1 The Qing Dynasty: An Invaded History.....	30
2.2 Diving into the Imagery: the Myth	33
2.3 Déjà Vu: a “You” and “We” Separation.....	39

2.4 Summary.....	44
CHAPTER 3: SLANT-EYED IMAGERY ACTING AS DISCOURSE.....	44
3.1 The Societal Power Relations.....	44
3.2 In the Fashion Industry.....	45
3.3 In Other Fields.....	47
3.4 Summary.....	54
CONCLUSION.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	58

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Four subtypes of epicanthal folds.

Figure 2: The Serbian Volleyball team poses with their eyes pulled after winning the European championships in 2017 that put them into the World Championships in Japan. Photo: FIVB

Figure 3: The photograph 骄傲的矜持(*Proud of being reserved*) created by 陈漫(Chen Man), A screenshot of it being displayed on one of Dior's social media accounts before it was removed

Figure 4: The official theatrical release poster of *The Brides of Fu Manchu* in 1966

Figure 5: A warm hat from the Qing Dynasty, one of the collections of the Palace Museum in Beijing

Figure 6: a screenshot of the music video of the song *Queen of Chinatown* (1)

Figure 7: a screenshot of the music video of the song *Queen of Chinatown* (2)

Figure 8: a screenshot of the video recording the graduation fashion show of the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, May 20, 2021.

Figure 9: Julie Chen before and after the blepharoplasty

Figure 10: Cai Niangniang making slant-eyed gestures on Tiktok

INTRODUCTION

Aim and Research Question

There is a long-existing stereotype in Western society against Asian people that they all have slanted eyes. But having slanted eyes is only a symbolised sign behind which cultural meanings with racial bias were condensed to create a myth. The goal of this thesis is to use the Western fashion industry to investigate how the slant-eyes imagery against Asians is continuously enforced through a specific genre programmed in the cultural products and the implications of that process.

To illustrate the aim of this article, the subject that is under discussion must be clarified first. The slanted eyes referred to in the context of this thesis has a specific meaning of racial disparagement so that the term is not interchangeable with the terms “small eyes”, “narrow eyes”, and such. The criteria to presume what kind of eyes are small or big is a much more personal and subjective matter unrelated to the supposed idea of race. That is not to say that the phenomenon in which people belonging to a certain cultural group tend to show aesthetic preference or lack thereof towards the eyes that they commonly considered to be small does not exist but merely that the “small” is a much more neutral word used to describe eyes when it is compared with the term “slanted” since the latter is heavily coloured with a type of negative racial bias against Asian people. Besides, the word “small” can solely be used to judge one trait, the size, of eyes yet the word “slanted” depicts not only the size but also a particular shape when it is used to characterise eyes. Then what do the supposed slanted eyes look like? Generally, when the word “slanted” is used to describe eyes, it is believed to be an exaggerated expression against a gene expression called epicanthic fold or epicanthus. Anatomically speaking, this term means a skin fold, of either the upper eyelid or the lower eyelid or both, covering the inner corner (medically named medial canthus) of the eye. The factors like ancestry, some medical conditions, and age influence if one will have what kind of epicanthus. Many young children, regardless of ethnicity, have epicanthus because of their underdeveloped nose bridges but will eventually lose epicanthus after growing up. The occurrence of this referred phenotypic trait does have a higher frequency among some ethnic groups from the regions of East Asia and Southeast Asia. In some extreme cases, the majority of the adults, up to

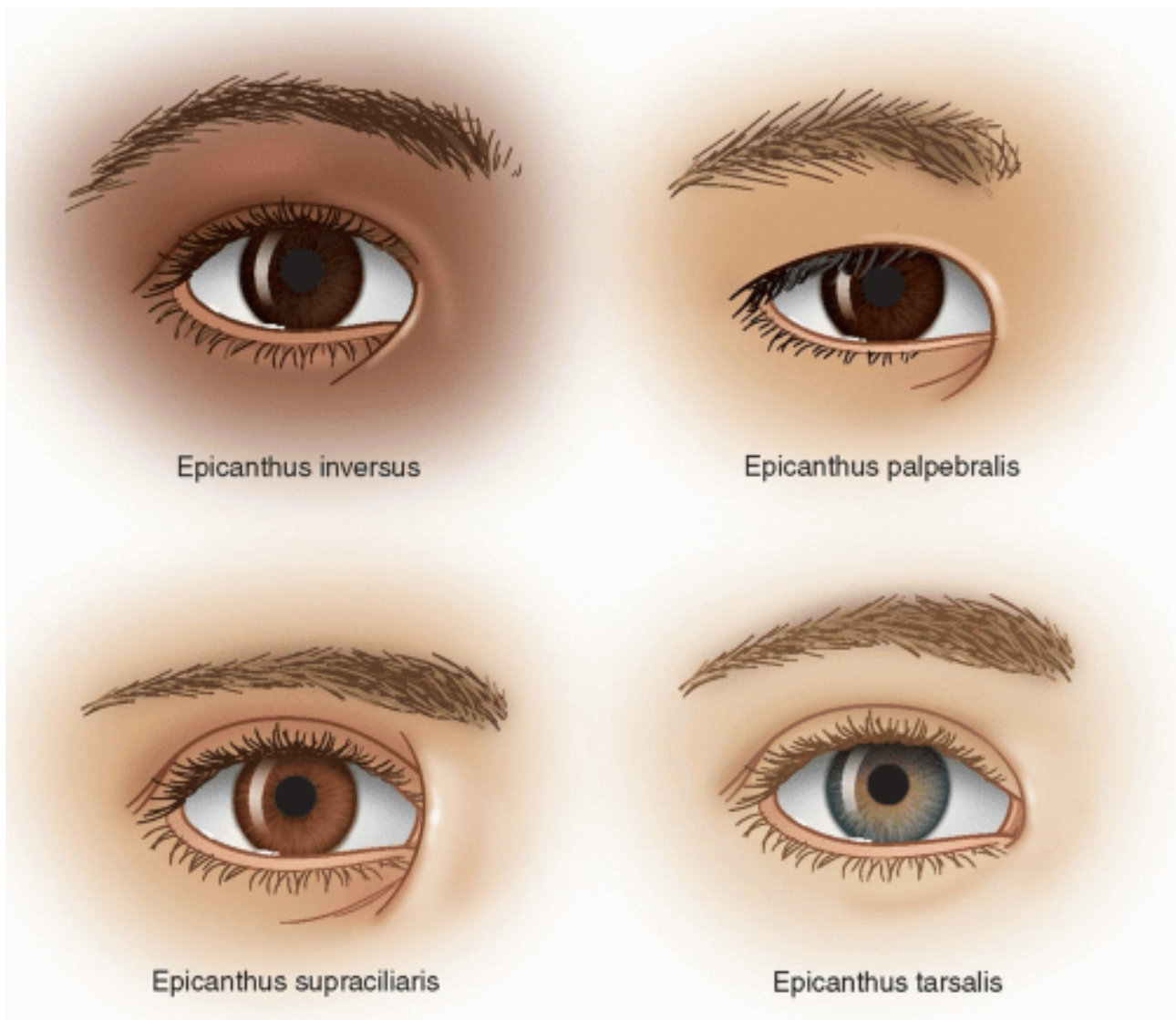


Figure 1: Four subtypes of epicanthal folds.

90% in estimations, have this feature from said regions.¹ There is no denying that it is possible the strongest kind of epicanthic folds will make the starting points of the medial canthus appear to be dragged down, the opening angles of the medial canthus narrower, and the distance between the centre points of the upper eyelids and the centre points of the lower eyelids closer when compared with the eyes having no, mild, or partial epicanthic folds. As an effect of these properties, the eyes will visually appear to be like a slit tilting upwards with the irises partially concealed by the eyelids. But owning the epicanthus or not is a probability event even among the Asian people and each individual who has it shows has a different case. There are four types of epicanthal folds (Fig.1). The Epicanthus tarsalis begins from the crease of the upper eyelids and joins the skin around the

¹ Lee, Y., Lee, E., & Park, W. J. (2000). Anchor epicanthoplasty combined with out-fold type double eyelidplasty for Asians: do we have to make an additional scar to correct the Asian epicanthal fold?. *Plastic and reconstructive surgery*, 105(5), 1872-1880.

medial canthus. The Epicanthus palpebralis originates from the upper eyelids and extend to the lower eyelids. The Epicanthus inversus runs from the lower eyelids and extends to the upper. The Epicanthus supraciliaris starts from the eyebrow toward the lacrimal sac.²

There are some much more unfortunate factors other than ancestry that will let people have the most extreme kind of epicanthus. Such as medical conditions like Noonan syndrome, Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, etc. For example, Down syndrome is a disease caused by a type of genetic disorder in which case a person's chromosome 21 has a fully or partially duplicated copy. Besides having slanted eyes as one of the symptoms, the people who suffer from this disease are highly likely to have severe problems with cognition, heart, gastrointestinal and immune systems.³ In English, there is an outdated expression that the word "Mongoloid" is used to refer to the people having Down syndrome by metaphorically making the adjunction to the similarity in appearances between the indigenous people of East Asia and Down syndrome patients. This case is probably one of the oldest origins that constitutes the slant-eyed racial bias against Asian people. In short, what to be noted is that all Asians having the most extreme case of epicanthus is factually incorrect since the possibility is never the equivalence to inevitability. To have the stereotype that all Asians should have, or can be symbolically represented by the most extreme case of epicanthus is simply ignorant.

Done with the necessary preamble to avoid misunderstanding, we can finally discuss the meaning of the slant-eyed imagery. Under the context of this essay, slant-eyed imagery is defined as the effect created by a dramatic genre repeatedly used to depict Asian people in cultural products such as photographs, movies, paintings, etc. Purposeful methods, including but not limited to special makeup techniques, elaborate lighting setup, control over the facial expressions, and selective casting were applied to achieve the effect that the Asian figures being depicted have extremely slanted eyes. In this genre, cultural objects, sometimes already gone through cultural appropriation, with ethnic elements from a certain period usually appeared significantly along with the figures with slanted eyes. Such genre not only creates a stagnant overall impression towards Asians regardless of the change of times but also establishes a classification system using highly Western-centric cultural norms, and values to determine what is considered to be pretty or ugly, normal or abnormal, inferior or superior, etc. purely based on the already academically proven false idea of

² Nguyen, M.Q., Hsu, P.W. and Dinh, T.A. (2009) *Asian Blepharoplasty*, *Semin Plast Surg.* 2009 Aug; 23(3), p.185

³ Hayes, A., & Batshaw, M. L. (1993). Down syndrome. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 40(3), pp. 523-535.

racial distinction. Such racially disparaging imagery also creates unbalanced power dynamics through social discourse by creating a distinct “they-we” oppositional separation in identities between the objects and the subjects, the viewers and the ones being viewed. The purpose of this thesis is not to judge the slant-eyed imagery from the aesthetic point of view or to promote the idea of objecting to aesthetic pluralism blindly but to assert how the people are impacted by the slant-eyed imagery and how they judge or are judged by implicating or being implicated in such imagery so that a clear symbolic interpretation of this imagery can be shaped through theoretically established combinatorial properties. Under that circumstance, “they” will know, “we” will know, “they” will know “we” know, “we” will know “they” know, “they” will know “we” know “they” know, “we” will know “they” know “we” know. And then, a universal and transparent mutually understanding mechanism in regards to the meanings of slant-eyed imagery and how it works as social discourse influencing our behaviours will be possible to achieve. By that time, the intercultural miscommunication, racial bias, stereotypes, and Western-centric value orientation in aesthetic standards will all be mitigated so that discrimination against people naturally born with eyes bearing a shape similar to what the racial bias ascribed and people with Asian ancestry will be reduced.

This is not a fact-finding article aiming at investigating and mapping the historical origins of how the slant-eyed imagery came into shape albeit some certain historical backgrounds linked to the materials analysed in the article are necessarily supplied to provide the factual shreds of evidence and the context for each given case to be understood. Three research questions should be bear in mind when engaging in the analytical process of this article:

- 1) How are the materials, constructed according to the slant-eyed imagery, in the case studies perceived by us perceptually?
- 2) What symbolic meanings can we read from the materials provided in the case studies after the social and historical context are provided in a methodologically analytical process?
- 3) What functions and impacts does the slant-eyed imagery, exercising as social discourse, have in the cases analysed in the article?

Background and Relevance

The idea of writing this article dedicated to symbolically understanding the stereotypical association between Asian people and slanted eyes in a cross-cultural context with a global perspective given different historical background roughly surfaced because of several sports news coverages about one specific incident that is totally irrelevant to the fashion industry.

In June 2021, a Serbian volleyball player named Sanja Djurdjevic, when after a Thai player failed to score a point during Serbia vs Thailand #VNL match in Rimini, Italy, placed her fingers on the skin areas of the outer corner of her eyes, and then put pressure onto the skin to make it stretched upwards and outwards simultaneously so that her eyes were narrowed and slanted. This gesture, commonly known as the slant-eyed gesture, is globally believed to serve the purpose of conveying taunt and contempt to people of Asian ancestry by suggesting their supposedly shared trait of appearance as owning slanted eyes even though its exact meaning is nowhere officially defined clearly and comprehensively in written language. The Serbian volleyball player has been subsequently banned by the International Volleyball Federation for two matches and fined 20,000 Swiss francs for publicly making such a racially disparaging gesture which contradicts everything that sportsmanship stands for.⁴ The Volleyball Federation of Serbia responded by posting a press statement through their social media account on Facebook that reads:

‘We are deeply saddened by the recent events ... We apologise sincerely to the Thailand team, people of Thailand and to all of you affected by this. But, please, don’t blow this out of proportion! Sanja is aware of her mistake and she immediately apologised to the whole Thailand team. She only wanted to show her teammates ‘let’s start playing defence like them now’, she didn’t mean any disrespect. Of course, it was unfortunate. It all ended up as a simple misunderstanding, in a friendly atmosphere between the players of the two teams⁵’.

⁴ Serbia volleyball player banned over racist eye gesture, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57418141> (accessed 29 July 2022)

⁵ Staff writers from Fox Sports, ‘She didn’t mean any disrespect’: Serbian volleyball team forced to apologise for racist gesture, <https://www.foxsports.com.au/olympics/tokyo-olympics-serbian-volleyball-team-racist-gesture-apology/news-story/c67b792dc38a2f96cacc7dc72745e94e> (accessed 29 July 2022)

In this statement, instead of letting the audience construe the slant-eyed gesture by the usually perceived cultural norms, the Volleyball Federation of Serbia attempted to alternatively define and interpret the gesture made by Sanja Djurdjevic into a fixed and clear meaning by providing a textual context in which Sanja Djurdjevic was conferring with her teammates regarding their tactics for the remaining time of that game rather than gloating on their success in stopping their oppositions from scoring by suggesting the opposing Asian players are less powerful, competent, and racially inferior to Djurdjevic and her Caucasian teammates. There is no question that symbolic gestures are left with certain room for interpretation given their relative ambiguity. Yet the statement still admitted that the gesture created a “they” and “we” racial binary opposition by reducing the Asian people to a generic type that is symbolised by slanted eyes.



Figure 2: The Serbian Volleyball team poses with their eyes pulled after winning the European championships in 2017 that put them into the World Championships in Japan. Photo: FIVB

But such an explanation favourable to the public image of the Serbian volleyball team became highly questionable when the whole Serbian team was found out to have posed the slant-eyed gesture in front of a camera in 2017 (Fig.2) after winning the European championships where they gained the qualification to compete in the World Championships in Japan. It was clearly not a strategical exchange of information about the tactics since the game was already over back then and their poses were made not between the team members but to the camera and the viewers. By comparing the two scenarios parallel where the said gesture was made, the common ground in the mentality of those signifiers was found that they all consider themselves to be in a celebratory and victorious status in which they were to win, defeat, to outshine their Asian rivals. Plausibly, the

translation of that gesture into a colloquial phrase would be similar to “we are better than you”, “we are out to destroy you” or etc.

This incident, which perfectly showed a case of people of Asian ancestry being forced upon the slant-eyed imagery in which their other characteristics are considered insignificant and removed, thus reduced to a simplified and abstract type, stirred up the academic necessity of diving into this problematic phenomenon. Nowadays, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Racism, and Western-centrism (not just Eurocentrism but also include Anglocentrism, American exceptionalism, etc.), the key ideological components of the underlying structure of slant-eyed imagery, are constantly criticised and challenged not only in the academic world but also among the general public. That is why it must be understood and analysed in a more meticulous, systematic, and theoretical way for the purpose of comprehensiveness. Yet, the mysteries still remain unsolved. Why the Asian people being tied up to the symbolic reduction of slant-eyed imagery? In what ways is this imagery used? What kind of knowledge, belief, and interpretation towards this imagery do the people who use it possess? What kind of knowledge, belief, and interpretation regarding this imagery do the people, against whom the imagery is used possess? What kind of knowledge, belief, and interpretation of this imagery do the people who use it assume and perceive the people, against whom the imagery is used possess? What kind of knowledge, belief, and interpretation about this imagery do the people, against whom the imagery is used, assume and perceive the people who use it possess? All of these mysteries should be examined in different social backgrounds and historical contexts given the fluidity of meanings and cultural interpretations of imagery as a symbolised racial reduction since the symbolic system and culture themselves are not fixed. A holistic apprehension of the meanings and impacts regarding said imagery with a high level of accuracy can only be obtained if we adopt a developmental and understanding way of investigation. That is why my research questions are important.

To find a specific angle to cut into the problem of the slant-eyed imagery semiotically, the fashion industry is an excellent choice for three simple reasons. Firstly, when it comes to fashion, the whole industry is majorly dependent on creating visual materials to invoke sensual stimulation and establish imagery during which process denotation and connotation are naturally needed. Secondly, the entire industry in the contemporary world is heavily Western-centralised considered purely from the perspective that nearly all of the top fashion companies with the highest market values

dominating the industry are from Western countries⁶ where the slant-eyed imagery was firstly created and frequently used. Finally, with the rapid economical growth, the Asian region has become a strongly desirable marketplace for most fashion companies. In order to open that market, tons of advertising materials and marketing strategies have been customised and launched to the Asian market. It is without question that the original intention to employ such efforts is to please the customers in Asia. But among those advertising materials and marketing strategies, some are considered to be controversial, insensitive, and racially disparaging by the local customers. They eventually caused the opposite result of endearing and became highly damaging to the reputation of the companies involved. The said materials constitute an excellent pool of specimens when addressing and analysing the slant-eyed imagery against Asians in a contemporary context.

Empirical Material

The empirical materials used in this article to construct my arguments include photographs, a music video, lyrics, academic publishings, and news coverages. Some of the materials are used only for their demonstrative values, some are to serve the purpose of exemplifying, and some are for their academic origins or authority to support my thesis or explain my academic position. They will not be mentioned one by one in detail here since they will be self-explanatory enough when seen in context. While there are five main cases that will be theoretically studied in the article by using visual analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis. They are:

- 1) a controversial photograph named 骄傲的矜持 (*Proud of being reserved* in English translation), shot by a world-renowned Chinese visual artist named Chen Man, containing slant-eyed imagery which was displayed at ART'N DIOR Exhibition in Shanghai from November 12 to 23, 2021
- 2) The theatrical release poster in 1966 of a movie called *The Brides of Fu Manchu* depicting a supervillain of Chinese ancestry

⁶ Combined top 200 fashion brands, Public/Private, <https://fashionunited.com/i/top200> (accessed 29 July 2022)

- 3) The official music video production and the lyrics of a song in 1977, sang by Amanda Lear, with the name *Queen of Chinatown*
- 4) An interview of Julie Chen, a famous television personality, news anchor, and producer for CBS in America, discussing the elective cosmetic surgery performed on her eyes
- 5) A news article released by BBC reporting the massive amount of criticism from Chinese People against the up-mentioned controversial photograph displayed at ART’N DIOR Exhibition in Shanghai.

Each of these cases is necessary to be methodologically analysed in order to establish the reasoning process and the logic chain of the point that this article tries to make. The photograph in the first main case and the anatomy of it is, of course, the centrepiece of the whole disposition regarding the argument to be made against the slant-eyed imagery. The music video referred to in the second main case is used to demonstrate that the historical and cultural elements of the slant-eyed imagery that appeared and identified in the photograph from the first main case relate to certain colonial history. And the negative context affiliated with the slant-eyed imagery was explained by analysing the main character named Fu Manchu and the plot of the movie. In the third main case, a musical production of Amanda Lear is used to address the high degree of similarity and consistency in the presentations of the slant-eyed imagery from the materials in the first three main cases despite they being produced by different persons from different countries in different times so that the existence of such an established, static genre will be proven. The analysis of this musical production will also explicate what ideas people perceived from such imagery, and how they read into them. In order to show the impacts of this racist imagery has gone beyond the world of images into our real life in fields other than the fashion industry and the imagery itself has taken over the power and acts as social discourse, the interview of Julie Chen, a renowned television personality, news anchor, and producer for CBS in America who gained her success in career only when after she had gone through an eye-enlarging surgery, will be scrutinised as the fourth main case. Finally, how the slant-eyed imagery acts as discourse rationalises, justifies, and reinforces itself will be demonstrated in a news article, reporting the boycott from Chinese People against the photograph in the first main case, published by the British Broadcasting Corporation, a mainstream English media conglomerate.

All of the materials studied in this article can be obtained through the Internet. The links to the websites providing them are attached in the footnotes when they are analysed in the text.

Theory and Method

There are three theories mainly referred to in this thesis. The first one is Orientalism under the context of Edward Said's criticism. Originally, Orientalism was used to describe a branch of studies of Western scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries of the languages, works of literature, religions, philosophies, histories, works of art, political systems, etc. of Asian societies in a general idea, geographically and conceptually speaking, of the 'Orient' opposing to the Western societies as the 'Occident'. Said published his book *Orientalism*, one of the most important publications in the studies of postcolonialism, in 1978. By using the eponymous terminology Orientalism in a sense of denunciation, he pointed out that the Western depiction of the Eastern world in these studies of Orientalism is always contemptuous, inaccurate, imaginative, and biased. Besides, the Western Orientalists monopolised the power of asserting what is the truth regarding the descriptions and understanding of the Oriental world. 'The Orient and Islam have a kind of extra-real, a phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert. From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself⁷'. With institutionalised mechanism, established practices, terminology and lexicon, academic achievements, imagery, and ideologies, Orientalism transformed itself into a body of knowledge that addresses and depicts the Eastern world in a way that was generally believed to be accurate and authoritative among the Western world. Orientalism acting as a discourse became an essential component of the Western civilisation by drawing a clear distinction ideologically between the East and the West as if they were mutually exclusive. And it also created not only a whole set of false understandings of the Eastern world but also practices and standards that are expected to use to understand the Eastern world as a result of unbalanced power dynamics in discourse. In a nutshell, Orientalism is, in nature, a Western-centric authority of

⁷ Said, E. W. (2016). *Orientalism*. In *Social Theory Re-Wired*. Routledge, p.223

restructuring the Eastern world with the purpose of domination. Even though the Orientalism that Said criticised is in the sense of it when where we now recognise as the Arabic or Middle-eastern regions are depicted, the descriptive theory is still applicable as an explanatory angle and historical background in the case of understanding the cause and nature of the misrepresentation of Asian people in slant-eyed imagery discussed in this article in a general sense.

The semiotic theory proposed by Roland Barthes is the second theory applied in this article. Semiotics is a field of study dealing with signs, the signal system, the meaning-making process, and the relationship between the signs and society. Semiotics is used to understand the system in which cultural meanings are embedded, reinforced, maintained, and expressed in signs during the communication process. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure firstly came up with the definition of the signifier and signified as two elements of a sign in which the signifier is a sound-image or a word and the signified is a concept⁸. With the premise of that design, Barthes introduced the idea of connotation and denotation, the former means the meanings culturally programmed into the signs, and the latter stands for the explicit meanings of signs. Barthes concludes that every object, idea, or text, no matter whether it came in which form, verbal, written, or pictorial (e.g., an image or a photograph), has the potential to be a myth conveying meanings⁹ in his book *Mythologies* published in 1972. Based on his argument, we can safely view the images containing slant-eyed imagery as a culturally referential sign and study the slant-eyed imagery and its mythical meanings, constructed through denotation and connotation, communicated to the viewers under the framework of semiotics. Barthes believes that images are significantly connotative with implicit meanings regardless of whether they are apparent or explicit. They are capable of delivering messages and meanings despite the implication as such is likely to be partially or hesitatingly understood. The slant-eyed imagery is hence possible to be analysed its meanings by the semiotic theory of Barthes. Moreover, the connotative meanings decoded and understood by the receivers are influenced and decided by their previously existing framework of ideologies or cultures so that the interpretation of signs, such as the slant-eyed imagery can be different drastically due to the divergence in mindsets. Barthes believed that despite the signs of different ideological constructions produced by language and images, the images take precedence in the communication process. 'The image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are

⁸ De Saussure, F. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press, pp. 60-62

⁹ Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Macmillan, P. 12

parasitic on the image¹⁰. Consequently, any texts derived from the images should not be perceived as independent. And that became the guideline for me when I analysed the textual contents in association with the slant-eyed imagery.

The last theory that will be incorporated in this thesis is the discourse theory put forward by the scholar Paul-Michel Foucault. The centre of this theory addresses the relationship between knowledge and power. To Foucault, power is not external, outright coercion that is forced upon us to let us do what we do and behave in a certain manner, rather it is something imposed from within ourselves through social norms, ideology, procedures, and such. It acts as discourse, a shared system of meanings in which diverse versions of knowledge, truth, and the self fight over each other, to shape individuals in a way that aligns with a preferred type. In that sense, power is not only from the group of people who might have more repressive power over the others but something we are all subjected to and disciplined by. Foucault: ‘Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but it comes from everywhere¹¹’. The idea of this discursive force as discourse is illuminating to the understanding of the social impacts of cultural phenomena like the slant-eyed imagery and the procedure of how such impacts came into place. By observing the exercise of power and the transference of ideology through the perspective of discourse, the construction of reality and modification of social relations as the implications of the slant-eyed imagery will become more transparent.

The empirical materials are all acquired through the internet as existing data. According to their nature and modality of them, there are three methods that are used in the article to analyse the materials in the cases. They are visual analysis, content analysis, and discourse analysis. In order to study slant-eyed imagery, it is inevitable that we will need to look into some specific images and figure out the visual constructions, the cultural elements, the similarities in the genre, and the embedded meanings in them. Visual analysis is necessarily needed for that purpose. The cases analysed in the article also contain some texts originating from content, in association with, or influenced by the slant-eyed imagery. Qualitative content analysis will be employed to assert the inexplicit meanings, the underlying bias, the communicative pattern, the hidden intention, and the symbolic correlations of those texts from the individuals and cultural groups. One of the ultimate goals of this thesis is to study the actual social impacts of slant-eyed imagery. That is why an

¹⁰ Barthes, R (1977). *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press, p. 19

¹¹ Foucault, M., (1976). *History of Sexuality* , p. 93

examination with discourse analysis is required to reflect the power dynamics of such imagery in our real life by contextually observing the interactions and the relationship of it with the social structures, human behaviours, and the shared beliefs among a certain group of people. Those methods may be used in an intertwined fashion given the differences in the format of the materials presented in the case studies and for the benefit of the outcome this article wanted to achieve through the methodological analysis.

Previous Research

Orientalism, semiotics, and discourse are three academic fields in which numerous previous pieces of research have been done extensively, meticulously, and combinatorially. What's more, academic efforts are still being made heavily and continuously on these three topics. Notwithstanding it's nearly impossible to go through all of the previous research, I found three articles that are the most interesting and inspiring, especially when they were compared side by side with each other, to me regarding the subject this article wants to address. The first one is *The West and the Rest* written by Stuart Hall. In this article, Hall furthered the criticism of Orientalism from Edward Said, broke the boundary of Europe against the Middle-Eastern regions in Said's description, and developed the paradigm in which the world was in general split into 'the West' and 'the Rest' by their oppositional relationship of the one who was conquered, colonised, and dominated and the one who conquered, colonised, and dominated. By analysing the texts and images describing 'the Rest' from 'the West', he also found the discourse similar to Said's conclusion in which dualism, stereotypes, and secessions are the obvious existences in the works of 'the Occident' studying 'the Orient'. Hall also believes that 'the West' is only an idea rather than a geographical fact. As he wrote: 'These days, technologically speaking, Japan is "Western", though on our mental map it is about as far "East" as you can get'¹². Yet the Second article *Orientalism and the Study of Japan* written by Richard Minear, in which an extensive amount of influential and authoritative works of Japanese Studies in his time were analysed by him, points out that despite the absence of Western invasion and

¹² Hall, S. (1992). "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." *Formations of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 318

Colonisation, Japan still exists in the Western scholar's works in a fashion of Orientalism as Said criticised¹³. And the third article mentioned here is *Hollywood's slanted view* written by Murakami Yumiko. It described the phenomenon that the Japanese and Japan are always presented in a stereotypical way in Hollywood's film productions. It was observed that there are only two types of Japanese, a female stereotype as the geisha and a male type as the samurai, in Hollywood's movies. She described:

'We are seldom satisfied by the Hollywood film portrayals of Japanese because they play on a dubious perception of " Orientals " and a dated view of Asians in general. At the worst, Hollywood is satisfied to maintain these stereotypical portrayals, Exotic, extreme, eccentric, and different are the characteristics Hollywood presumes of its Asian characters. Japanese are seldom if ever allowed to be ordinary people on screen.'¹⁴

This article, even though at the first glance has no direct resemblance to these three articles, tries to reveal how the slant-eyed imagery as a symbolic production of Orientalism in a specific historical context badly influences society through discourse. My work differs from the previous research because it uses slant-eyed imagery, which is an extremely under-researched subject, as a particular angle to approach the broader ideological questions. And the analytical process was done in the exact cultural and historical context of China.

Disposition of the Thesis

The main body of this thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, the controversial photograph named 骄傲的矜持 (*Proud of being reserved* in English translation), shot by a world-renowned Chinese visual artist named Chen Man, containing slant-eyed imagery which was displayed at ART'N DIOR Exhibition in Shanghai from November 12 to 23, 2021 will be

¹³ Minear, R. (1980). "Orientalism and the Study of Japan." *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIX.3: 507 – 17

¹⁴ Yumiko, M. (1999). *Hollywood's slanted view*. *Japan Quarterly*, 46(3), p.54

introduced with its background information and then given a description of its visual presentation like the colour of it, the look, the gesture, the position, the makeup, and the accessories of the model in it, etc. And then, each element that composed that photograph will be analysed individually in detail. After that, how the photograph in question will be perceived as a whole will be discussed and it will conclude that the slant-eyed imagery depicting Chinese people is linked to the Qing dynasty during which China was invaded by the Western countries.

That conclusion will lead us to the second chapter of this thesis in which the historical background of the Yellow Peril, the Siege of the International Legations, and the Boxer Rebellion will be described. The invented character of a Chinese supervillain called Fu Manchu appeared in different novels, movies, and comic books, created based on that kind of historical background will be analysed to help the reader understand what kind of implied meanings are embedded in the slant-eyed imagery that creates a myth. The theatrical release poster in 1966 of a movie called *The Brides of Fu Manchu* will be the visual material provided. Followed by that, the analysis of the official music video production and the lyrics of a song in 1977, sang by Amanda Lear, with the name *Queen of Chinatown* will show that the Chinese-related slant-eyed imagery is a fixed genre nevertheless the change of times by proving the similarity of it with the previous cases.

In the last chapter, the slant-eyed imagery will be discussed as a discourse to address its power dynamics with the society, implications beyond the fashion industry, and persistency in existence. An interview of Julie Chen, a famous television personality, news anchor, and producer for CBS in America, in which she talked about the elective cosmetic surgery performed on her eyes as the cause that made her career, and a news article released by BBC reporting the sizeable protests from Chinese People against the up-mentioned controversial photograph displayed at ART'N DIOR Exhibition in Shanghai from a Western angle will be studied as cases.

Finally, by answering the research questions in a general sense, a conclusion will be made to summarise the central point of this thesis, address the importance of it, discuss its limitations, and address the questions that will arise from this thesis in order to discuss the possible directions for future research.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT?

To investigate something residing in people's minds and its existence relies on the process of the transmission and interpretation of meanings, abstract ideas, and ambiguous concepts is extremely hard and unreliable without a specific case or substantial materials as corresponding proofs. The imagery in one's mind must be solidified into physical existence such as texts or images so that it will be possible for people other than that person her/himself to perceive and understand. Besides, the textual analysis of an image, or imagery will not have its tenability if there is nothing perceivable to be matched and compared to. What is more, the comprehension of imagery which is a part of the field of visuality, based purely on the textual description will be highly likely to be a result of miscommunication. That is why we will demonstrate and analyse a specific photograph in this chapter as an approach to build our understanding of the slant-eyed imagery of Asian people in the Western fashion industry, to be more exact, the slant-eyed imagery that was built toward Chinese people regarding their specific cultural and historical background.

An Overall Description

In this section, we will probe into the questionable photograph with slant-eyed imagery displayed at an exhibition of Dior. Christian Dior, commonly recognised as Dior, is a French high-end fashion company controlled by the LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE, a French holding multinational corporation and conglomerate with the specialisation of manufacturing luxury goods. Having a market capitalisation of €264.6 billion, LVMH ranked as the most valuable company in Europe and the 21st most valuable company in the world in the year 2021. The leading and dominating position of the company as the pillar in the global fashion industry is unquestionable. In



陈漫 作品

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Figure 3: The photograph 骄傲的矜持(*Proud of being reserved*) created by 陈漫(Chen Man), A screenshot of it being displayed on one of Dior's social media accounts before it was removed

the fiscal year, ended December 31, 2021, the revenue of LVMH made from the fashion and leather goods business is €30,896 million of which 50% came from the geographic regions of Asia (Japan included)¹⁵. The exploration and control over the Asian market, of course, is viewed by LVMH as a key point in its strategies to maintain its financial success worldwide. Sharing the same strategies, Dior held the ART'N DIOR Exhibition, at which different supposed “artworks” created by different influential artists incorporated with Dior's products such as handbags and clothes were displayed, in

¹⁵ LVMH: TRANSLATION OF THE FRENCH FINANCIAL DOCUMENTS FISCAL YEAR ENDED DECEMBER 31, 2021 <https://r.lvmh-static.com/uploads/2022/01/financial-documents-december-31-2021.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2022)

Shanghai from November 12 to 23, 2021 at Shanghai West Bund Art Centre as a gesture of endearing the Chinese market. This is clearly a commercial strategy Dior employed as an attempt to tie its brand image with the concept of art and reintroduce it to the public so that its association with the culture of the elites or the upper class of the society would be reinforced. In the fashion industry, it is not an unusual practice for a luxury brand to strap itself to what is considered to be the high culture that has collective social esteem since one of the most important functions of luxury goods is being able to offer a perceivable sense of separation from the general public to their users. Establishing art foundations, holding competitions for designs, and such are also common and proactive practices adopted for the purpose of maintaining the image of luxury brands.

In that particle exhibition of Dior in Shanghai, with the aim of showing the company has a deep connection with China so that a sense of closeness will be established between the brand and its customers, Dior decided to show more pieces of artwork made by Chinese artist or containing what they considered to be the “Chinese cultural elements”. Among those artworks, there was a photograph shot by 陈漫(Chen Man) who is considered to be a reputable Chinese visual artist in the Western fashion industry. She does fashion photography for world-renowned Western fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, and *i-D*. That photograph(Fig.3) named 骄傲的矜持 (Proud of being reserved) pictures a Chinese woman holding a handbag from Dior. After it was exhibited physically in Shanghai and promoted by Dior through their social media accounts, huge waves of criticism were aroused in Chinese society because the photograph was believed to contain the slant-eyed stereotype defaming Asian people. “#Dior摄影作品被指丑化亚裔(English translation: The photograph from Dior accused of vilifying Asian people)#” became the most viewed topic on 微博(Weibo), one of the major Chinese social media platforms, during November 13 to 17, 2021 with approximate 170 million clicks¹⁶. After this incident went viral, Chen Man released an apology on November 23 saying that she accepts all of the criticism towards that photograph and she is sorry for her ignorance and immaturity when she took that photo, which is unthoughtful because it is one of her early works. Dior also released a statement on the same date saying that the photograph is one of the art projects Dior initiated hence that is not a commercial. Immediately after, the physical display of that photo was removed from the exhibition and all

¹⁶ 道歉声明被质疑“甩锅”，“黑历史”被扒，迪奥真有那么无辜吗?(English translation: The apology statement questioned for “blaming the others”, is Dior that innocent?), <https://finance.ifeng.com/c/8BRNXru8mRz> (accessed 29 July 2022)

virtual display was also deleted from Dior's official social media accounts. It has been mentioned previously that making the slant-eyed gesture is believed to be a way of conveying contempt to Asian people by suggesting they all have slanted eyes which suggest their hypothetical racial inferiority. This picture was seen as the extension or transformation of that racial disparagement in the photographic form. That is why this photograph was perceived by so many Chinese people to be immensely offensive. So what exactly was the depiction of that photograph?

Turning back to Fig.3, we can see that it is a vertical medium closeup, colloquially referred to as, a bust shot of an Asian woman. The size of its physical display at the exhibition is unknown since all the official description of it has been deleted by Dior. The background of the photo is an irregular blur of khaki and brown colour gradients. The woman pictured in the photo has grizzled hair which looks very greasy. Most of her hair is tied up into a bun on the back of her head but the hair on the left and right sides of the head is loose. There are also a few strands of curly hair sticking to her forehead. Two hairpins shaped like twigs with semi-transparent fake flowers with various colours on them are stuck into her hair, one on the left side of her head and one on the right side of the back of her head. Her face is plump and looks like she has baby fat on her face. Her eyebrows look thin, almost faded. Extremely heavy eye shadow with the colour black was applied to the inner corners and the outer corners of her eyes while the highlight was applied to her upper and lower eyelids. Her eyes were accentuated, elongated so that they looked extremely slanted. Her head is slightly bowed so it appears that the woman in the photo is staring at you from a low angle. There are freckles, cannot tell whether synthetic or not, all over her face with dark-red blush applied to her cheekbone. That made her face look muddy and tanned. Her lips are closed and painted black. There is no smile on her face. The woman in the photo wears a tweed dress in which the main colours are dark purple, dark blue, and dark red. Some white threads were used to decorate the dress. She is holding a black handbag with polished surfaces of Dior to her chest level. The handle of that bag conceals the lower lip and the chin of that woman. Her hands are placed on the different sides of the bag. There are two wide, silver bracelets with no markings and smooth surfaces on her left wrist. Two pointy dark-coloured nail protectors are wore on the little finger and the ring finger of her left hand. The focal points of the camera were on her head, her hands, and the Dior bag. The overall tone of the photograph is dark and dull. Before the photograph became an abomination to Chinese people, Dior officially introduced this photograph as a typical case of '中学为体，西学为用', which can be roughly translated into 'Using the Western techniques to express the Chinese

essence'. That is to say from Dior's perspective, the woman pictured in that photo is how a typical Chinese woman would look like.

Taking apart the Image

Now that we have analysed the picture with a fairly neutral word description, what elements in the photograph caught our eyes the most besides the slanted eyes and the handbag of Dior accentuated in the centre? The first thing that drew my attention is the style and the material of the hairpins the model wore. It looks like they are made of plastics at the first sight due to their looks of semi-transparency. But the material of it is actually something called 料器(Liao Qi) that was invented and produced specifically in China. Liao Qi, also referred to as 琉璃(coloured glaze) or 五色玉(multi-coloured jade) by people from ancient China, is a kind of colourful glass that are made under a relatively low temperature¹⁷. Pigments were added accordingly during the process of its production to achieve the effect of having a variety of colours. It cannot tolerate a high temperature and are extremely fragile so it was always used in the production of decorative objects including hairpins, brooches, snuff bottles, and such. It was firstly invented roughly during the Qin(221–207 BC) and Han(202 BC – 9 AD, 25–220 AD) Dynasties of China as an attempt to imitate and duplicate the texture and the look of jade. So it was firstly named multi-coloured jade. The name “Liao Qi” is used to call this material solely during the Qing Dynasty(1644–1911) of China when its production came to a period of great prosperity. At that time, Liao Qi was difficult to make because of the limited development of technology. The objects made of this material were beloved by the people of high social status such as the royal families, the concubines, the high-ranking government officials, and so on for the delicacy in the structures and exquisite appearances these objects have. Most of the existing antiquities made of Liao Qi are made during the Qing Dynasty¹⁸.

¹⁷ 穆宁. (2017). 火中雕塑 玲珑料器. 收藏, 23.

English translation: Mu, N. (2017) Sculptures in the fire The delicate Liao Qi. *Collections*, 23.

¹⁸ 张荫曾. (2007). 家藏料器盖盒. 收藏, (2), 129-129.

English translation: Zhang, Y. Z. (2007). Collections of Liao Qi at home. *Collections*, (2), 129-129.

The lack of durability made Liao Qi become out of use gradually after the Qing Dynasty came to its end.

The other element that is exceptionally noticeable in the photograph is the nail protectors worn on the model's left hand. The Chinese traditional nail protector is also called 护指(the finger protector). It was a decorative and practical object designed for the wealthy Chinese women in the old times with the purpose of protecting long nails and attaining aesthetic beauty. The nail protectors are immensely used by the Empress and the concubines during the Qing Dynasty since it was considered to be beautiful to have long nails¹⁹. The Chinese women with high social status at that time did not have to do heavy labour works or even any chores. That is why they spent a lot of time considering what can be done to look prettier meticulously to please their husbands. Growing long nails was one of those efforts since it is significantly time-consuming and the long nails tend to break easily if not enough attention was paid to protecting them in daily life. Nearly all the nail protectors have the shape of a half-opened cone so that the air would be able to float through them when they were worn. The materials used to make the nail protectors usually include gold, silver, jade, copper, and vitreous enamel. Decorative and elaborately designed patterns are customarily attached to them using exquisite craftsmanships such as hollowing out, filigree, engraving, and inlaying. With the end of the Feudalism of the Qing Dynasty, nail protectors have also faded out of people's everyday life and become one of the things that people are only expected to see when they pay a visit to the museum for a very long time in modern China.

Experiencing the Image as a Whole

Now that we have separated and identified the fragmented Chinese cultural elements shown in this photograph of an Asian woman with artificial slanted eyes, how the picture as a whole is perceived and experienced by the viewers will be discussed here. Albeit this process is necessary, it is also highly personal due to the differences in cultural backgrounds, ideologies, aesthetic preferences,

¹⁹ 吴香君, & 张玉花. (2018). 中国传统指甲套研究. 中国民族博览, (3), 6-7.

English translation: Wu, X. J. & Zhang, Y. H. (2018). A study of Chinese traditional nail protectors. *Chinese Ethnography*, (3), 6-7.

social norms, real-life experiences, and so on of the viewers. So it is important for the readers to bear in mind that it is not necessary for you to experience this photograph exactly like what will be described here from the perspective of a viewer with a Chinese cultural background. Still, efforts will be made to make the description here as universal and neutral as possible.

First of all, the picture overall is in a cold colour tone with a low saturation which created a faded look of the photo as if it is distant. A feeling of separation and alienation is created due to the photograph's expression in colours. The monotone and dullness of the picture cannot let people associate anything about happiness, relaxation, excitement, or other positive emotions with it. The background of the photo is out of focus with an irregular blur of khaki and brown colour gradients. That creates a psychedelic vibe in the photo. The woman pictured in the photo has extremely greasy hair as if she has not been washing her hair for quite a while or she just dipped her hair into a basin full of oil. The first impression that popped out when I saw her hair is that it will definitely smell bad. Her hair is grizzled, which suggests that she is supposed to be of a certain age. But her face is plumped without creases as if she still has baby fat which makes the viewers tremendously confused about how to assume her age. Her eyes were heavily shadowed around the eye corners. Yet highlights were applied to her upper and lower eyelids. That made her eyes look unbelievably thin and long. With that makeup, she seems to have very deep eye sockets or heavy dark circles around her eyes which make people wonder if she is beaten up, has severe malnutrition, or is associated with some supernatural ominous beings like a ghost. The model's head is slightly bowed and positioned in the centre of the photo. She squinted slightly into the camera so it looks as if she is looking up into the eyes of the viewers from an angle below. Her eyes are expressionless and emotionless unlike the eyes that a human being would have. The hollowness in her eyes suggests vigorously that she is indifferent and scheming something and up to no good. Those eyes remind me strongly of an image of a mysterious creature hidden under a rock looking into the observer's eyes and that creature will attack mercilessly once the rock has been lifted. There are many freckles all over the model's face that gave her a look of wildness or primitiveness. With the heavily applied maroon blush over her cheeks, her face looks muddy and pathologically tanned as if she is a savage living in an area with a high altitude and strong sun exposure. Her lips, closed and slightly pursed, were painted black and gave her an unhealthy look just like she is suffering from food poisoning. The curves of her lips are seemingly straightened. But it also looks a bit like the model is trying to force out a sinister smile. The accessories, like the hairpins and the nail protectors, she wore looks unusual, quirky, impractical, and ancient in the contemporary context. They made her look like a

concubine from the old times when China was still ruled by the Emperor and his royal family. The pointy nail protectors seem pretty sharp and dangerous. No one would be surprised if he or she is told that the nail protectors could be used as a murder weapon. Her old-fashioned accessories of her drew a dramatic contrast to the shining, modern black handbag from Dior which she held to her chest level. By posing that gesture, it seems that she is trying to show off that handbag to the viewers and trying to hide behind it at the same time by using the handle of the handbag to block out her lower lip and her chin. She held the handbag in a way so dubiously that it looks like as if she acquired that handbag through some illegal means. Overall, to the author, the model pictured in Chen Man's photograph looks like an evil, ancient zombie from China that is freshly exhumed out of a tomb or suddenly revived in a museum. During the time she was still alive, she had an extravagant life by oppressing the normal folks together with her Emperor as a husband. And now she has come back from the graveyard as a supernatural being with the purpose of restoring the patriarchal, monarchical feudal, and authoritarian regime of her time back to its glory. Just like the name given to the photograph by its creator, 'Proud of being reserved'.

Summary

From November 12 to 23, 2021, Dior held an event located in Shanghai called the ART'N DIOR Exhibition with the purpose of endearing its Chinese market. Dior displayed a series of "artworks", incorporated with Dior's products in them, created by different artists at Dior's request. As a gesture of showing that the brand has a strong relationship and extensive amount of familiarity with China, Dior decided to infuse more of what they considered to be Chinese elements into the Exhibition. The photograph, named 骄傲的矜持 (Proud of being reserved), shot by the Chinese photographer Chen Man is one item highly praised and heavily promoted by Dior since they consider it to be "Chinese" enough. That photo depicts a Chinese woman holding a Dior handbag. The resemblance of her to a slant-eyed concubine of an ancient Chinese feudal dynasty was established through combinatorial use of colours, elaborate makeup techniques, manipulations of visual language, and choices of props or accessories. The resemblance may be perceived and interpreted to be exotic, bizarre, unfamiliar, cunning, vicious, mysterious, incommunicable, rich, conservative, deceptive,

ageless, dirty, greedy, uncivilised, savage, primitive, patriarchal, immoral, or dangerous by the viewers. But Dior designate this created figure, lesser of a human being, to be the perfect representation of Chinese women and described it as “the essence of China”. The massive protest from Chinese society against that photo suggests a huge divergence in the belief of how a Chinese woman would look like between the French fashion house Dior, a giant in the global fashion industry, and the Chinese people. The most memorable and greatly criticised features of that photo are the dramatic, synthetic slanted eyes of the model and the choice of Liao Qi hairpins and nail protectors as accessories. In the previous texts, those accessories have been identified and traced back to a very specific historical period of China, the Qing Dynasty. That finding stirs up some new questions. Is it just a coincidental and isolated incident that the slant-eyed imagery is linked to the Qing Dynasty? What exactly happened during the Qing Dynasty regarding its relationship with the Western world? What is the connection between the slant-eyed imagery of Chinese people presented in this case from the Western countries and the historical international incidents happened during the Qing Dynasty?

CHAPTER 2: LOOKING AT THE IMAGE AGAIN VIA SEMIOTICS

Semiotically speaking, The slant-eyed imagery formed a myth. For Barthes, ‘myth is a system of communication, ... a message... it is a mode of signification, a form. Later, we shall have to assign to this form historical limits, conditions of use, and reintroduce society into it: we must nevertheless first describe it as a form.’²⁰ (Barthes, 1972, p. 107-108). That particular myth is a system serving the purpose of differentiating, classifying, and ranking people based on the ideological separation of race. In this myth, the Asians, reduced to a type of people having slanted eyes, are naturally and righteously considered to be racially inferior to the people of Western countries. In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of that myth rather than discussing it in a general sense, the questions sparked by the case analysed in the previous chapter will be discussed further here in

²⁰ Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Macmillan, pp.107-108

order to figure out what does the Qing Dynasty have anything to do with the slant-eyed imagery of Chinese people. To address a culturally specific myth formed during a long period of time, it is inevitable to consider the historical background behind it. That is why an introduction to the history of the Qing Dynasty must be given. Yet, there are numerous major historical incidents involving countless historical figures from many countries that are considered to be relevant during the 275 years the Qing Dynasty stood, so it is not possible to give a detailed description of each incident here. Besides, this article is not an informative essay in the academic field of Chinese history aiming at establishing facts through evidentiary discoveries. That is why the historical elements that are believed to be pertinent to the analytical process of this article may be fragmented. And they will mostly only be referred to by name or given a brief introduction here as already-proven facts. This article will try its best to stipulate to the authenticity of these facts by only citing academic sources or the original documents. The readers will have to do their own research if they become particularly interested in the details of one or more of the incidents mentioned here.

The Qing Dynasty: An Invaded History

清朝(The Qing Dynasty), also known as 大清(The Great Qing), was the last imperial dynasty of China. It was ruled by the Manchu, one of the ethnic minority groups in China. The Manchu chieftain 皇太极(Huang Taiji) founded the dynasty in the year 1636. And the regime of it was officially overthrown by the Chinese people in the year 1912 as the result of the 辛亥革命(Xinhai Revolution)²¹. In the late Qing Dynasty(1840-1912), China was invaded by Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, France, the United States, Italy, and Austria-Hungary multiple times under the spree of Western colonisation all over the world. The Qing government was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties like the Treaty of Nanking, the Treaty of Tientsin, the Treaty of Aigun, the Convention of Peking, the Treaty of Shimonoseki, and the Boxer Protocol, etc. with those invading countries after losing some major wars like the First Opium War(1840–1842), the Second Opium war(1856-1860), the First Sino-Japanese War(1894–1895), and the Siege of the International

²¹ Hang, H. C. S. (2016). China, imperial: 8. Qing or Manchu dynasty period, 1636–1911. *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, 1-13.

Legations(1900), etc. Those unequal treaties ‘contained one-sided terms, requiring China to cede land, pay reparations, open treaty ports, or grant extraterritorial privileges to foreign citizens²²’. China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society during the late Qing Dynasty. Among all of the excuses those countries used to legitimise, justify and encourage their invasions against China, the Yellow Peril was the most notorious and effective one. The Yellow Peril is a racial metaphor based on the colour of skin. It distinguishes the people with yellow skin of East and Southeast Asia from the Caucasians in the Western world and insists that the people of yellow skin are existential threats to Western societies. The phrase was not merely a racist ideology but also a field of academic studies in the Western world at that time. According to the primary idea of the Yellow Peril, the Western countries were doomed to be invaded, outnumbered, overpowered, and enslaved by the people of East and Southeast Asia with a ‘core imagery of apes, lesser men, primitives, children, madmen, and beings who possessed special powers’²³. In central Europe, Under the advice of the Orientalist and diplomat Max von Brandt, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Emperor of imperial Germany at that time, used the phrase *die Gelbe Gefahr* (The Yellow Peril) to encourage other European empires to invade, conquer China jointly in order to pursue colonial interests and then justified the colonialism with that phrase²⁴. Starting approximately from 1849, a large number of Chinese immigrants were introduced to the United States as labour force because of the Gold Rush there. But the “native-born” white working-class of America soon started to blame Chinese immigrants for stealing jobs from them. Chinese people were described to be

'uncivilised, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order; the first words of English that they learn are terms of obscenity or profanity, and beyond this, they care to learn no more’²⁵.

The disparaging phrase “slant-eyed” was invented around that time. Under the racist political heat, the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting all Chinese people except merchants, teachers, students,

²² Fravel, M. T. (2005). Regime insecurity and international cooperation: Explaining China's compromises in territorial disputes. *International security*, 30(2), 46-83.

²³ Dower, J. (2012). *War without mercy: Race and power in the Pacific War*. Pantheon. p.10

²⁴ Rupert, G. G. *The Yellow Peril or, the Orient versus the Occident*, Union Publishing, 1911. p. 9.

²⁵ "Chinese Immigration to California 29 Sept 1854 NY Tribune". *New-York Tribune*. 29 September 1854. p. 4.

travellers, and diplomats from entering the U.S. for 10 years, was legislated by the U.S. government in 1882. The Yellow Peril, dehumanising the Asians as an imminent threat to the Western societies, beautified, justified, and legitimised the practices, including enslaving, raiding, destroying, and slaughtering, performed by the Westerners during the colonial age. Violence and cruelty, even when firstly used, became understandable, acceptable, and even praiseworthy when they were used against something that the perpetrators cannot relate to, something evil, malicious, and lesser of human beings. The invasions from the Western countries were fought by the Chinese civilians during the Qing Dynasty of course. But the righteous resistance coming from the grass-root level of Chinese people against the colonisation was considered to be the solid proof of Yellow Peril and used as an excuse to irrupt China in a fiercer way. The most famous uprising started by the Chinese people at that time would probably be the Boxer Rebellion, also called the Boxer Insurrection or the Yihetuan Movement. The Boxer Rebellion was an anti-foreign, anti-colonial, and anti-Christian movement that happened between 1899 and 1901 in China. It was initiated by a grass-root organisation called 义和团(the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists) of which most of the members had practiced the Chinese martial art named 义和拳(Righteous and Harmonious Fists)²⁶. That Chinese martial art was recognised as Chinese boxing by the Western invaders. In 1900, the members of the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists gathered in Beijing with the purpose of supporting the Qing government by exterminating the invaders. An Eight-Nation Alliance of American, Austro-Hungarian, British, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian troops were formed and then sent to Beijing to squash the uprising. In order to encourage the Imperial German soldiers to be more barbaric against the Chinese resisters, Kaiser Wilhelm II gave the Hun speech on 27 July 1900 to his soldiers before they were sent to China to thwart the Boxer Rebellion. He said:

‘When you come before the enemy, you must defeat him, pardon will not be given, prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands will fall to your sword! ... so may the name of Germany become known in China in such a way that no Chinaman will ever dare look a German in the eye, even with a squint!’²⁷

²⁶ 林华国. (2001). 历史的真相——义和团运动的史实及其再认识. 历史学习, (10), 3-7.

English translation: Lin, G.H. (2001) The Truth in History-Facts and Reintroduction about the Boxer Rebellion. *Learning the History*, (10), 3-7.

²⁷ Röhl, J. C. (1996). *The Kaiser and his court: Wilhelm II and the government of Germany*. Cambridge University Press. P.14

The situation in which the invaders invaded a country by brutal force merely because of the existence of the country invaded, and the invaders expected no fight-back, neither on the government or the grass-root level, from the country invaded or else it would be seen as the justification for their previous invasion may seem extremely outrageous and illogical in the contemporary world. The plot of a raper running around, yelling about being raped, and continuously raping others at the same time seems will only happen in an upside-down world. But under the explanation of the Yellow Peril theory, every atrocity was just, forgivable, and reasonable. The Yellow Peril as an ideological invention served its cultural, political, moral, and economic purposes just alright. Said described Orientalism in his book:

‘The most important thing about ‘the theory during the first decade of the twentieth century was that it worked, and worked staggeringly well. The argument, when reduced to its simplest form, was clear, it was precise, it was easy to grasp. There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power.²⁸’

It is the same with the Yellow Peril as what is asserted in Said’s text about Orientalism since the Yellow Peril is the most extreme and ominous form of Orientalism.

Diving into the Imagery: the Myth

The rapid development in science and technology made it possible for the Western world to expand its territories and capital accumulation exponentially by the means of aggressive colonial expansion all around the world at the time when they invaded the Qing Dynasty. In the homelands of the colonisers, people’s everyday life was reshaped by colonisation simultaneously. The advancements

²⁸ Said, E. W. (2016). Orientalism. In *Social Theory Re-Wired*. Routledge, p.34

in transportation means and informational transmission technologies brought great convinces to the Westerners' life. Apart from being able to have a higher living standard by spending the treasure raided from the colonies worldwide, the perception of the people living in the Western countries towards the world has been sharpened significantly by the newly emerged information carriers like coloured films which created a tremendous increase in demands regarding the consumption of cultural and recreational products. In order to meet that demand, the exoticism coming from the distant colonies became an excellent choice for the themes in the Western creation of cultural and recreational products. The colonisers brought what they witnessed, what they heard, what they experienced, what they mugged, and what they stole from the countries they invaded back to their homelands. And what they brought back as trophies were usually all full of distinct and strong cultural icons from the colonies. After being appropriated culturally or described falsely, those cultural icons were incorporated into the cultural and recreational products to satisfy the curiosity coming from the general public of the Western societies towards the distant, different, and mysterious Eastern world. The depiction of the Eastern countries or figures at that time was usually inaccurate, imaginative, and biased since they are not made with the goal of demonstrating the Eastern world accurately and objectively but to satisfy the mental needs of appreciation of ugliness, exoticism, and grotesqueness. Those cultural and recreational products are full of racial bias, presumed imagination, foreign cultural elements that are taken out of contexts, and colonial superiority, but the only thing lack in them is veracity. According to Barthes: 'Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication; it is because all materials of myth(whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.'²⁹

That is why we need to examine the actual materials to understand the myth of slanted eyes. Under that historical background, the invention of the character Dr. Fu Manchu(傅满洲) was one of the most notorious examples. Dr. Fu Manchu is a fictional Chinese figure cooked up in a series of novels by Sax Rohmer(15 February 1883-1 June 1959), an English novelist. Fu Manchu was written firstly in a short story by Rohmer called *The Zayat Kiss* in 1912, the same year the Qing Dynasty came to its end. In 1912, that short story was combined with nine others Rohmer wrote afterward into the novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* in 1913. Rohmer wrote 14 books in a total of the character Fu Manchu before he died in 1959. Rohmer made a fortune out of this character as the incarnation of Yellow Peril since there were over 20 million copies of the Fu Manchu novels

²⁹ Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Macmillan, pp.107-108

sold in his lifetime. Fu Manchu was referred to as a Doctor because in the stories he holds doctorates of philosophy, law, and medicine from four prestigious colleges, the Heidelberg University, the Sorbonne University, the University of Edinburgh, and the Harvard University, of the Western countries. You may think of him as a well-learned and peaceful scholar by seeing this information. But in the plots of the novels, he is a Chinese supervillain who attended those universities only for acquiring the knowledge that he intended to use to brutally rule the Western countries. The name Fu Manchu was a title of honour that came from Manchu, the ethnic minority group that ruled China during the Qing Dynasty. Fu Manchu was believed to be a member of the imperial family of China who supported the members of the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists in the Boxer Rebellion mentioned previously in the article. Fu Manchu was described to be a member and the mastermind of a Chinese crime ring named Si-Fan in the early novels (1913–1917). At that time, Si-Fan is only a domestic organisation in China aiming at assassinating Westerners living in China. But in the plots of later (1931–1959) books, Fu Manchu gained control over the Si-Fan and transformed it into an international crime ring with the sole purpose of dominating the world and bringing China back to its glory of the former Qing Dynasty. The Si-Fan is financed heavily through illegal activities, especially drug deals and human trafficking³⁰.

Even though the age of Fu Manchu was not specifically mentioned in the novels, Dr. Petrie, another character in the novels, believed that Fu Manchu was over 70 years old. Fu Manchu invented and perfected a formulation of an elixir of life with his knowledge of Oriental and Western medicine. He drank it to prolong his life and strengthen his energy. He cruelly tortured and murdered the people, especially Caucasians, who stood in the way of his plan of conquering the world by using not guns but arcane objects such as weirdly-shaped knives, pythons, venomous snakes, poisonous mushrooms, spiders, bacteria, or other strange creatures and poisonous chemicals in nature. Fu Manchu usually had dacoits (professional criminals, armed robbers, and murders from India), members of other underground societies as well as Si-Fan of his own to do the bids for him as minions so he could stay behind the scene and be mysterious. In short, Dr. Fu Manchu is the incarnation of Oriental devilry, merciless cruelty, and ambitious depravity. But his conspiracies were always thwarted by brave, kind-hearted, and upright male Caucasians. The character was continued or adopted in other books, cinema, television, and comics for more than 90 years and became one of the prototypes of the characterisation of criminal genius and mad scientist. Then how

³⁰ Seshagiri, U. (2006). Modernity's (yellow) perils: Dr. Fu-Manchu and English race paranoia. *Cultural Critique*, 162-194.

was Dr. Fu Machu, a completely fictional Chinese supervillain, designed to look like in the visual materials produced in the Western world? And why is this question relevant to the analysis of myth created by the slant-eyed imagery? The answers will be provided here by demonstrating and examining a theatrical release poster of a movie called *The Brides of Fu Manchu* as the pictorial material(Fig.4).



Figure 4: The official theatrical release poster of *The Brides of Fu Manchu* in 1966

The Bribes of Fu Manchu is a crime movie that came out in 1966. It was produced by Harry Alan Towers for Hallam Productions and distributed by Anglo-Amalgamated Productions(United Kingdom) and Constantin Film AG(West Germany). The movie was adapted from the novels from the Fu Manchu series written by Rohmer. In this movie, Fu Manchu was played by Christopher Lee, a male Caucasian. The plot of the movie is as followed. In 1924, Fu Manchu, his cruel daughter Lin



Figure 5: A warm hat from the Qing Dynasty, one of the collections of the Palace Museum in Beijing

Tang, and his evil gangs of dacoits were snatching the daughter of renowned scientists all around the world and shipping them to the deserted island of Fu Manchu's den as hostages used to coerce their fathers to help Fu Manchu to build a machine that can convey some mysterious energy to the world through the radio transmitters. That mysterious energy could be used to control people's minds so that Fu Manchu would dominate the world. Those girls kidnapped would be made Fu Manchu's bribes against their will. However, Fu Manchu's arch-rival, detective Nayland Smith of Scotland Yard found out about that plan and scarcely defeated Fu Manchu again.

The main colours of the official theatrical release poster of the movie, as we can see, are white and red. That contrast reminds people strongly of the imagery of blood. Fu Manchu is positioned in the centre of the poster by the medium shot, holding an unconscious woman dressed in a ripped red dress with both of his arms. The Fu Manchu is pictured in white and black. But there are red spots on his white long shirt (men used to wear long shirts, or referred to as cheongsam, during the Qing Dynasty) as if it is indeed covered in blood. His nails are long and sharpened into a pointy style. Nail protectors are worn on the pinky of his left hand. The light seems to be coming from the top right of Fu Manchu so that shadows were created around his eye sockets and concealed his eyes to make them look slanted. He looks thin, old, cold, and indifferent. His moustaches are particularly long and thin. The hat he wears is the same style as the hat of the winter uniform that government officials of the Qing Dynasty have to wear on formal occasions (Fig.5). It is called 暖帽 (the warm

hat) in Chinese. The shape of the warm hats is round, with a brim around it. The materials used to make the warm hats include leather, wool, satin, and cloth. The colour of the warm hats is black. There is also a red cap weft in the middle of the warm hat, or it is made of silk. The outside centre of the warm hats is always decorated with red silk tassels. Gems are customarily embedded in the top of the hats. There was a strict rule about what kind of gems the government officials could use based on their ranks³¹. Behind Fu Manchu, there is a red silhouette in which a group of half-naked Caucasian women with provocative gestures is pictured.

To the viewers, the overall red-and-white presentation makes the poster look ominous. The Fu Manchu in black and white creates a sense of distance in both sentiment and time. He looks old, but the presence of those half-naked Caucasian women suggests that he is extremely hypersexualised. His slanted eyes, the blood-like stains on his shirt, his ancient costume, his pointy fingernails, his nail protectors, his expressionless face, and his weird moustaches all send an intense sensational message to the viewer in the way just as the photograph of Dior does. ‘Better dead than wed’ is what the Western viewers were expected to think when they see this “typical” Chinese man. Barthes once wrote: ‘myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it’³². The photograph of Dior and this poster, demonstrating the images of a Chinese man and a Chinese woman constructed according to the slant-eyed imagery from the Western world, perfectly show how the myth against Chinese people is constructed. Under the concept of signifier and signified proposed by Saussure in semiotics. In the first layer of the structure of that myth, the photo and the poster themselves act as the signifier. “Chinese people are ageless; have slanted eyes; wear impractical ancient clothes and accessories; keep old habits and practices; do not show emotion; related to the Qing Dynasty” is the denotation of that signifier as what is signified. In the second layer, the denotation acts as the signifier. “Chinese people are exotic, bizarre, unfamiliar, cunning, vicious, mysterious, rich, incommunicable, conservative, deceptive, greedy, uncivilised, savage, primitive, patriarchal, immoral, dangerous, subjected to colonial power, thus inferior to the Caucasians” becomes what is signified in connotation.

³¹ 宫清. (2011). 清朝官服图案与官帽顶饰. 兰台世界: 上半月, (6), 77-77.

English translation: Gong, Q. (2011) The patterns on the uniform of government officials in Qing Dynasty and decorations on the hats, *Lan Tai's world*, (6), 77-77.

³² Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Macmillan, p.129

Déjà Vu: a “You” and “We” Separation

Now that the second and the third concerns raised at the end of chapter one have been answered, we will turn to the first one. The question about if there is a fixed pattern that links the Qing Dynasty to the Western creations of images depicting Chinese people with slant-eyed imagery so that a specific genre was created will be self-pronounced in an analysis of the official music video and the lyrics of a song named *Queen of Chinatown* sang by Amanda Lear. Amanda Lear, born in 1939 in Saigon when it still belonged to the Indochinese Union, is an influential French celebrity famous for her career as a singer, songwriter, television host, and former model. She is a close friend of the esteemed Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dalí. With the great success of her first four albums that once charted in the top 10 of European charts, she was recognised as a disco queen in Continental Europe and Scandinavia from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s. The song *Queen of Chinatown*, released in 1977, is one of her biggest hits. Just as the name of the song suggests, it is a disco composition with a theme driven by the Chinese elements and Oriental fantasies of its makers. The lyrics of the song were written by Lear herself and the music part was created by Anthony Monn. *Queen of Chinatown* was performed frequently on TV shows from 1977 to 1978 and once reached number two in the weekly chart of West Germany and number two in Italy shortly after it was released. There was an official music video produced for the song³³. It is strongly recommended that the readers should watch the full video before entering the analytical process here. This article will not address this song and its music video from the perspective of musicology here but to analyse the visual elements and the imagery generated in the lyrics. From a screenshot of the music video of the song *Queen of Chinatown*(Fig.6), we can see that the background is digitally synthesised with visual effects. The colour of the background is black. There are animated human faces coloured in light red and light blue and the spelling of “CHINATOWN” in light blue attached to the background. They all glow like neon lights. The animated human faces look as if they are the faces of women. They have extremely slanted and drowsy eyes and thin lips, but no nose, no ear, and no facial expression. Their hair is replaced and represented by what resembles an opened oriental fan. There are seven actual people on the screenshot, Amanda Lear herself, four female backup dancers, and two male backup dancers. The four female dancers all have a bob haircut with

³³ Amanda Lear - Queen Of Chinatown 1977 [online video] Bilibili, 屈扬扬扬扬扬, 15 May 2019, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1u4411J7fA?p=1&vd_source=4e0bf1d31f41865f7a4169994c1daacc (accessed 29 July 2022)

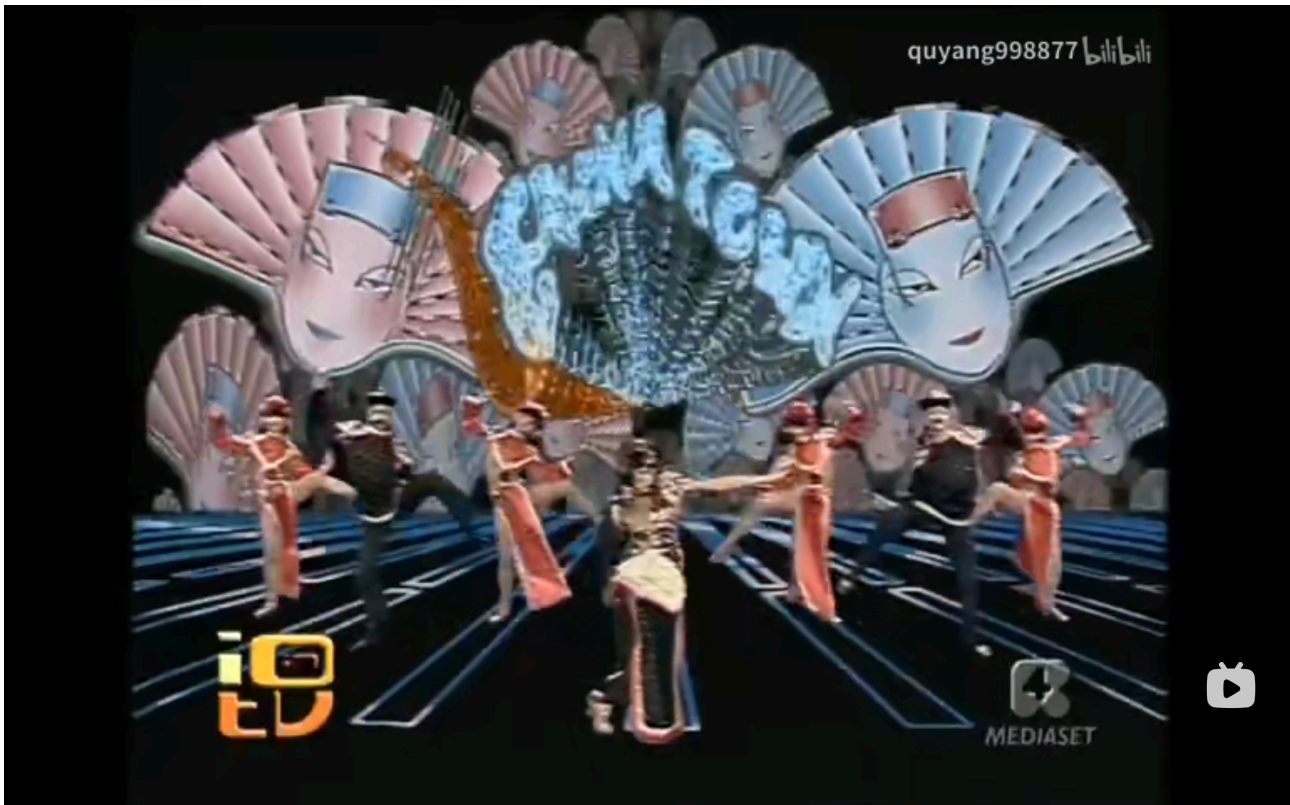


Figure 6: a screen shot of the music video of the song *Queen of Chinatown* (1)

thick bangs. There are fake plastic-like flowers in pink and red stuck into their hair. They all wear shining orange high-heels and fluorescent orange dresses which style looks like originated from a style of dress worn by Manchu women during the Qing dynasty called 旗袍(Qipao), but heavily twisted under cultural appropriation. The dresses are split from the hems up to the thigh level, even near the waist level on the side seams. That makes the female dancers almost half-naked. The two male dancers in the video have Fu Manchu moustaches and pigtails that the Chinese men in the Qing Dynasty used to have. They all wear a shortened version of the long shirts as Fu Manchu wore, and also lame copies of the warm hats from the Qing Dynasty. The faces of the female and male backup dancers are all painted white like geishas from Japan. And they all have slanted eyes resulting from the makeup applied to their eyes. In the video, the dancers twitch, squat, twirl, kneel, bow, crawl on the floor, shrug their shoulders, and kick high up in a quirky way as if they were channeled by some evil spirits.

Amanda Lear in the music video wore a hat decorated with black furry balls, strings of pearls, and paillettes. Her hair was woven into dreadlocks. She also wears a fake Qipao like the female dancers' but in black with red and white fringes. There is a Chinese dragon, an invented creature in Chinese mythology that was used as the symbol of the royal family during the Qing Dynasty, made by



Figure 7: a screenshot of the music video of the song *Queen of Chinatown (2)*

sequins attached to the front of the dress. An oriental paper fan is held in Lear's hand. She opens, closes, and waves it in the music video. Her eyes are coherently made slanted by makeup techniques. The slant-eyed gesture was intentionally made by her as well(Fig.7).

After seeing the presentation of *Queen of Chinatown* in visual form, it is time to examine the textual contents of it in order to examine the myth recalled by the song. In the first verse of the song, the lyrics read:

'It was down in Chinatown that I met the opium Queen
Babyface girl from Shanghai never smile and never cry.
She now rules the underworld down in Chinatown
She runs all the opium den down in Chinatown.
Bring her your gold bring her your worries
And when life gets a bit too dreary to stand
Give a ring to the Queen of Chinatown.

...

She'll pick you up when you're feeling down.

...

And she'll soon blow your blues away.³⁴

Now let us break down the lyrics words by words and read into their implied meanings. The 'opium Queen' used in the lyrics suggests that the Chinese woman described in the song is a powerful drug kingpin who has no fear of breaking the laws. She is dangerous, greedy, immoral, merciless, and indifferent because she does not mind smuggling controlled substances that will make people addicted, sick, or even dead to make money. She must possess some kind of violent force as her backup to fight against the law enforcement agencies that want to shut down her business. In short, she is a destruction of the fabric of society by that description. The word 'babyface' means that she looks young and innocent, but it is extremely weird for a young person to have so much power. Since one cannot assume her age, she will be considered to be mysterious and associated with some kind of supernatural power. She 'never smiles or never cries'. That indicates she does not seem to have emotions of human beings and she hides her thoughts pretty well. So she must be unreadable, reserved, cunning, rigid, incommunicable, sophisticated, and lesser of a man that one cannot relate to. The word 'Rules' suggest that she tends to use tough means to gain control like she is in a monarchy, an authoritarian and feudal society. She is in control of an 'underworld', a crime ring full of secrecy, criminal activities, oppression, poverty, dirty plays, unspoken rules separated from society, etc. that cannot see the light of day. She has a lot of 'opium dens', which shows her drug-related business is sizeable and carefully organised. She accepts 'gold', which means she still uses an ancient monetary system as one of her old habits. When people have negative feelings, 'bring her the worries' and she will 'blow your blues away'. That suggests that she offers recreations to let people become mindless in front of her. The video footage and the lyrics are combined to create a narrative of the imagery of a Chinese woman with slanted eyes. That narrative is exactly what Said described:

'Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilised, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society

³⁴ Queen of Chinatown Lyrics, <https://genius.com/Amanda-lear-queen-of-chinatown-lyrics> (accessed 29 July 2022)

(delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or-as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory-taken over.³⁵

If you use the textual narrative from the lyrics here to describe and understand Dior's photograph discussed in the first chapter, you will find how shockingly and strangely they fit like looking into the mirror. That is exactly the pattern, the genre we are looking for that was used to create the slant-eyed imagery of Chinese people. A high level of consistency in the style and vibe is unquestionable among the productions of Dior's photograph, the Fu Manchu movie, and the song *Queen of Chinatown* despite that they were created in different forms by different people of different countries from different times. In those depictions of Chinese people, a large number of cultural icons, no matter changed and twisted or not, were wrongly and overzealously used in order to show how accurate and professional those depictions of Chinese people and Chinese culture are, but only in the Westerners' eyes. However, a native Chinese person would be disgusted by those depictions not only because the cultural icons were wrongly used in them but also because they are all linked to an extremely negative context. In those depictions, Chinese people are lawless, ageless, expressionless, emotionless, shameless, etc. thus reduced to the objects, the background, the context, or the *mise-en-scène* without any autonomy. In the photograph of Dior, the Chinese woman was objectified as the background to show how pretty and chic Dior's handbag is. In the Fu Manchu movie, the Chinese people were dehumanised as the *mise-en-scène* to reflect the righteousness and bravery of that Caucasian detective who thwarted the evil plan of Fu Manchu. In the song *Queen of Chinatown*, Chinese people were reduced to the cultural context to be filled in the composition and rhythm of that disco song as a recreational cultural product. In that sense, the depictions of Chinese people are at the mercy of Westerners. The objects are not allowed to have their own thoughts and characters. They are only allowed to serve the purpose of what they are designed for and look like the way that has been assigned to them by their creators. That is how the "you" and "we" racial binary opposition was created between Chinese people and Westerners. The slanted eyes and the slant-eyed imagery are only used as a symbolised tool to substantiate that oppositional separation by race.

³⁵ Said, E. W. (2016). Orientalism. In *Social Theory Re-Wired*. Routledge, p.165

Summary

During the late Qing Dynasty, China was grossly invaded by the Western powers as a part of their global colonial plan. Chinese people were consequently designated to be an inferior race to the Caucasian people under the colonial context of Yellow Peril of Western countries. From then on, Chinese people were assigned a specific look or imagery of having slanted eyes and in association with the Qing Dynasty in the Western production of cultural artefacts, hence they are stuck with the negative context referred to in the Western depictions. China has a history of over 5000 years and 26 dynasties but only the connection with Qing Dynasty will appear together with the purposeful design of slanted eyes in those depictions of Chinese people. This established genre of slant-eyed imagery created a myth and a racial classification system even when the colonial age has passed.

CHAPTER 3: SLANT-EYED IMAGERY ACTING AS DISCOURSE

The Societal Power Relations

Barthes once said that myth has a ‘double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us³⁶’. After the National liberation movements happened in the Third World countries all over the world, the colonialism and Yellow Peril theory could not survive in their original and traditional form. Thus they have evolved and transformed into a more insidious, unnoticeable form in our social structures as discourse perpetuates itself and exercises the power from a higher societal level. The slant-eyed imagery is the projection of that discourse as a racist sentiment. That exaggerated slant-eyed look of Chinese people broke the limit of our perception and entered the real world. It changed its identity from merely a belief to established

³⁶ Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. London, UK: Macmillan, p.107

knowledge and then it changed from established knowledge to a set of standards requiring what kind of eyes Chinese people should have by shaping people's minds. It is so common for Westerners to believe that all Chinese people have slanted eyes that some do not even know or realise such belief is wrong and racially disparaging with its association with the negative historical context mentioned in the previous chapters. On the contrary, the images of Chinese people in real life have been blurred. It is a problem on both an ontological and an epistemological level. Given the fluidity of culture in a global perspective, aesthetic values of people are shaped by the slant-eyed imagery, and practices in the industries are built around it into a self-enforcing closed loop since the Western countries have tremendous industrial advantages in the production of cultural products, especially in the film industry, the fashion industry, the journalism industry, the television industry, etc. What is more, those industries sometimes work collaboratively in a synthesis. The different attitudes towards the slant-eyed imagery between the East and the West are caused by the unequally split of power in the saying of this matter. The discrimination, intentionally or unintentionally expressed, is forced upon the Chinese people, the Asians but the right of interpreting that discrimination is not at the hands of the ones being discriminated against since the exclusion of that right is included in that discriminatory structure. The slant-eyed imagery drew a racial distinction in a condescending way with a hierarchy system assigned to it. Because of the powerlessness in the discourse, some people oppressed by that hierarchal system gradually became submissive and compliant with it. Now, it is time to examine the power dynamics of the discourse produced by the slant-eyed imagery through some real-life cases in our social structure.

In the Fashion Industry

There is a phrase in the Chinese language that developed after China has been invaded by the Western countries during the Qing Dynasty writes “洋气”(pronounced yáng qì). Literally, “洋” means “the ocean” in Chinese, and its meaning can be extended to “foreign” since the oceans were usually what the Western foreigners traveled to China by. Literally, “气” means “vibe”, “aura”, or “spirit” in Chinese. So the literal meaning of the phrase “洋气” is “foreign vibe”. But the phrase has



Figure 8: a screenshot of the video recording the graduation fashion show of the Academy of Arts and Design, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, May 20, 2021.

an implied meaning of “pretty”, “chic”, or “fashionable”. That is to say that whatever comes from Western countries is naturally considered to be more advanced under the implied meaning of that phrase. There is also an antonym in Chinese to that phrase. It writes “土气”(pronounced: tǔ qì). Literally, “土” means “the earth” in Chinese, and its meaning can be extended to “domestic”. The literal meaning of the phrase “土气” is “domestic vibe”. “Ugly”, “old fashioned”, or “outdated” is the implied meaning of this phrase. When and where the implied meanings of those two phrases were invented by who is still a mystery. But the emergence of those phrases is understandable since the living standards in the western countries are indeed better due to their colonial history. The evolution in the Chinese language shows how erosive and contagious the Western-centric discourse is to the non-Western cultures. With the dramatic slant-eyed imagery the Western fashion industry repeatedly used to depict Chinese people, some people in the Chinese domestic fashion industry thought they should also keep up with that trend since they believed it to be a superior aesthetic standard. Tsinghua University is one of the most reputable universities in China and also top-ranked in the world. In the graduation fashion show of the Academy of Arts and Design of Tsinghua University on May 20, 2021³⁷, it was found out that only the models with narrow eyes were selected

³⁷ 清华美院2021年大学生时装周发布会[online video] Bilibili, 叶子微笑好美, 17 June 2021, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1jK4y197T1?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=4e0bf1d31f41865f7a4169994c1daacc (accessed 29 July 2022)

to walk that show and they were all applied to the slant-eyed style makeup to make their eyes narrower and more slanted(Fig.8).

The slant-eyed imagery acted as imperceptible authoritarianism in aesthetic values through discourse here. The Chinese aesthetic values were silenced, compromised, and forced to give their ways to the Western standard of how Chinese people should be looking like in that show not only since what the Westerners believed to be normal is what the soon-to-graduate Tsinghua students believed to be advanced and superior, but also the slant-eyed looks of the Chinese people are considered to be exotic or oriental enough in the Western fashion industry so that they will be more likely to be accepted in a global stage. This kind of understanding of beauty is highly western-centric and pathological.

In Other Fields

The slant-eyed imagery as discourse not only influenced the Asians who do not have slanted eyes, the Asians who do not have slanted eyes but eagerly use the makeup technique to pretend that they have slanted eyes in order to meet the Western standards, but also the Asians who are naturally born with slanted-looking eyes. They will have to live with fiercer discrimination caused by the myth that the slant-eyed imagery generated since negative historical and cultural contexts are attached to it. Subsequently, some of them chose to get rid of their slanted eyes through extreme means. Asian blepharoplasty, plastic surgery the proceeding of which may include cutting open and removing parts of the upper eyelid, raising the nasal bridge by inserting implants into the nose, and cutting open the eye corner, is one of those methods. The full proceeding of it could take several months. And the expected result of the surgery is enlarged eyes with double eyelids. David Ralph Millard, Jr. was believed to be one of the most famous doctors who popularised Asian blepharoplasty. Dr. Millard was called to active duty as the Chief Plastic Surgeon to the U.S. Marine Corps stationing in Korea in 1954³⁸. He thought that Korea is a paradise for plastic surgeons because the war created so many disfigured patients to work on. In the year he spent there, Dr. Millard treated hundreds of

³⁸ MILLARD Jr, D. R. (1950). Plastic peregrinations. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, 5(1), 26-53.

patients who were disfigured in the war and performed reconstructive procedures on them. Most of his patients were Korean. Initially, the procedures that are used later in Asian blepharoplasty were designed and refined by Dr. Millard for the patients whose eyelids need to be reconstructed after injuries. But a Korean translator approached him because of his reputation. The translator asked Dr. Millard to surgically make his eyes rounder and bigger since he believed that being unable to tell what he was thinking, the Americans thought of his closed appearance of eyes as a symbol of untrustworthiness. Here, the translator clearly thought that he was treated unfairly by the Americans with racial bias because of the shape of his eyes. Under the discourse created by the slant-eyed imagery. Dissing the slanted eyes is considered to be righteous and taken for granted since they are concluded as a sign of low social status in the hierarchy that discourse created. So instead of assigning fault to the Americans for being racists, he seemed to be more than happy to conclude that his eyes are responsible for the unfairness he suffered, are to be blamed, and to be removed of their traits. Millard later wrote in his article: ‘As this was partly true, I consented to do what I could’.³⁹ After the surgery, the translator with enlarged eyes told Dr. Millard with pleasure that several foreigners asked him if he is Italian. He was happy because he has removed his Asian identity and could finally be included in the group that controls more power and have higher social status. Dr. Millard later concluded that the mono-lids of East Asian people cause an impression of expressionless eyes peeping through a slit, that feature, with facts and fabrications, was then tied to the imagery of mysteriousness and conspiracy. He believed that plastic surgeons can help people fit into Western society better with plastic surgeries⁴⁰. His opinion indicated that not only did he agree with the negative meanings assigned to the slanted eyes in the discourse created by the slant-eyed imagery, but he also encouraged people to submit themselves to that discourse. The case here shows how the shape of the eyes was judged according to the Western criteria by that Korean translator and Dr. Millard. When being observed as an object, the Asian people are supposed to have slanted eyes in the Westerners’ view just like the cases in the previous chapters. But when considered as human beings, having slanted eyes is considered to be an abomination since it is designated to be a symbol of untrustworthiness and inferiority by Western standards. The Korean translator Dr. Millard worked on trying to gain approval from the Westerners by actively wanting to have Asian blepharoplasty to remove his symbol of Asian-ness in appearance. But there are people who were pressured to have the surgery more unwillingly under the discourse. Julie Chen was one of them.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



Figure 9: Julie Chen before and after the blepharoplasty

Julie Chen is a famous television personality, news anchor, and producer in America for CBS, one of the largest media conglomerates in the United States and worldwide. She gained success in her career after she had blepharoplasty. Julie Chen was born on January 6, 1970, in Queens, New York City. Her mother Wang Ling Chen is an immigrant from Burma and her father David Chen is an immigrant from China. In 2004, Chen got married with CBS executive Les Moonves. According to her self-disclosure about the blepharoplasty she had (Fig.9), her request to temporarily fill in the positions of news anchors who were on vacation was rejected by her news director when she was 25 years old and worked as a local news reporter in Dayton, Ohio. Her news director said that she will never be allowed to be on the anchor desk because of her Chinese heritage. She was considered to be not relatable enough to the community. And as she was told, the biggest problem was her Asian eyes. Her news director thought that on the camera, Chen look ‘disinterested and bored’ because her eyes are so ‘heavy, they are so small’. ‘Our audience can't relate to you because you're not like them⁴¹’, said Chen’s news director. What Chen was told might be racially offensive, but still quite true. The Westerners on a massive social level generally believed that under the slant-eyed discourse. The job of a news anchor entails that one must be able to present an image of

⁴¹ Chen, J. (2016, September 20). Exclusive: Why The Talk's Julie Chen Has No Regrets About Her Cosmetic Surgery. <https://www.glamour.com/story/julie-chen-the-talk-eyelid-surgery> (accessed 29 July 2022)

communicable, relatable, and convincing. Because of Chen's look, she was not considered to be a part of the Caucasian community since a racial binary opposition has been drawn by the slant-eyed discourse. It is okay for an Asian with slanted eyes to be a model in Western society since it is not necessarily needed for a model to be able to establish trust and connections with the viewers. In fact, it is even preferable for an Asian model to have slanted eyes since they are perceived to be eye-catching, different, and exotic, but only as a provocative object to provide visual stimulation. However, for the more down-to-earth jobs like news anchor, Asians with slanted eyes will not be welcomed in a white dominating society.

After she was rejected because of her Chinese heritage, Chen felt hurt and insecure because she desired a career in broadcasting. She became insecure and could stop thinking about her eyes. Then she started looking for a new agent to represent her and land her new job. She had the Asian blepharoplasty after she was suggested to have plastic surgery to enlarge her eyes by a reputable agent. Chen had the blepharoplasty at the age of 25 yet she never talked about it until she was in her 40s. After revealing the surgery she had, Chen received different reactions from the Asian community. Some felt commiserated, some discussed it like dirt, and some believed it was a betrayal of her heritage. Chen said that she was more than happy to share her experiences about her blepharoplasty to serve an informational and educational purpose since the reason for her to receive the surgery had 'everything to do' with her job⁴². Chen first became aware of the existence of blepharoplasty in Singapore when she traveled there to visit her relatives on her mother's side. She was around 13 at that time and she was suggested by some of her relatives to receive blepharoplasty after they saw her small eyes so that they think Chen will become prettier. She said that 'in these Asian cultures, especially one like Singapore that is so advanced and modern and Western, it was something that was already being practiced⁴³'. Chen did not choose to follow the advice of her relatives at that time since she believed that she would not necessarily be more beautiful with bigger eyes and she was raised to be believed in her competence rather than her look. She never heard about and thought of the blepharoplasty again until she was advised to do it by her agent at the age of 25. Chen said:

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

‘After much thought and discussing it with my parents, I made the decision to do it....I got the surgery not to look better, but to look more interested and engaged when I’m interviewing someone on TV. The benefit was that I *did* look better, at least by societal standards.⁴⁴

From this case, we can see that even though Julie Chen said that she does not believe in the implied negative meanings assigned to the slanted eyes under the classification system created by the slant-eyed imagery and she did not have the intention of abandoning her heritage through the removal of her Asian-looking eyes unlike the Korean translator mentioned before. Yet she still accredited the legitimacy to the existence of the discourse created by the slant-eyed imagery since she used the words ‘advanced’ and ‘modern’ to describe the Western-alike cultural sphere of Singapore in which slanted eyes are undervalued and blepharoplasty are performed more frequently to meet the aesthetic values like Caucasians. Besides, in order to gain success in her news anchoring career, she was still pressured by the discourse into receiving the surgery that changed the shape of her eyes. She was submissive to the unspoken rules of the tv industry in America and the cultural norms of the white dominating society. And that is why even though having blepharoplasty seems to be one of the progressive and proactive methods of fighting the slant-eyed discourse, it is still passive and subordinate in nature. Then what happened to the outright resistance to such racist discourse?

After the photograph of Dior, discussed in the first chapter, was displayed in Shanghai, heated discussions against the slant-eyed imagery were sparred all over the Chinese Internet. A lot of advertisements, movies, comics, etc. that are suspected to contain or be influenced by the slant-eyed imagery from the past have been dug out and became the subjects of the discussions jointly with Dior’s photo. This wave of criticism against the pictorial expressions of racism soon caught the attention of some major Western news agencies. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the national broadcaster of the United Kingdom and one of the most famous news agencies in the world, wrote a news article about the incident. Proving a Western depiction of the event, the narrative of that article will be examined here to demonstrate how the discourse residing in our society is so resilient against its critics. ‘China: Why some think “small eyes” are not beautiful’ is the title of said article.⁴⁵ The choice of word in the title alone is questionable here. By carefully avoiding the adjacent “slanted”, which has an implied meaning of racial disparagement, and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Yip, W. (3 January 2022). China: Why some think 'small eyes' are not beautiful. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59807019> (accessed 29 July 2022)



Figure 10: Cai Niangniang making slant-eyed gestures on Tiktok

replacing it with the relatively more neutral word “small”, the title itself is a statement that exonerates Dior of being racist and hints that Chinese people discriminate against people with small eyes. It blurred and sneakily changed the concept of what was criticised by the Chinese people. The first section of the article introduces a Chinese model named Cai Niangniang, who was criticised for being the model in a series of advertisements, reckoned to contain slant-eyed imagery by many Chinese people, produced for the Chinese snack brand Three Squirrels. The article insists that she was cyber-bullied and attacked online only for the eyes that she was naturally born with. ‘Her apparent crime? Having narrow eyes⁴⁶’, the article writes. By describing her as an innocent and diligent model suffering from abuse and discrimination for the looks given to her by her parents, the article subtly suggests the criticism against Cai Niangniang is unfounded and from a gang of mindless, cynical, and aggressive nationalists the existence of whom are universal in China. But the article mentioned no word and showed no picture at all about the fact that not only does she always put on makeup to deliberately make her eyes look slanted, but she constantly uploads videos to her social media account on Tiktok(a social media platform that allows its users to upload and share

⁴⁶ Ibid.

short videos) in which she performed the slant-eyed gesture(Fig.10). And that is what Cai Niangniang was really accused of.

The second section of the article shortly described what Dior has done that caused the backlash and mentions other brands involved afterward that were suspected of producing slant-eyed imagery. ‘nationalist netizens amid a period of heightened sensitivity online’ and ‘growing sense of online nationalism and anti-West sentiment’⁴⁷ are the words the article uses to describe the Chinese netizens who criticised the slant-eyed imagery. Those particularly negative descriptions were out of context, unsubstantiated, and sourceless, offered purely as the editor’s personal opinions. Using such derogatory terms contradicts everything that neutral wording, which is included in journalism ethics 101, requires. Then, the customary quoting from a Chinese news outlet, in this article the China Daily, is provided as a gesture of showing all points are taken. Followed by that is a very short description saying that disparaging slant-eyed stereotype does exist in Western society. The description only has 96 words to the 1223 words this article has in total.

The last section of the article begins with the subtitle ‘Rejection of aesthetic pluralism’. The title itself is not a fact but an assertion that will automatically implant a presumption into the readers’ minds to make them draw negative inferences towards Chinese people regardless of what they really did remaining unexamined. By insisting what the Chinese people objected to are small or narrow eyes rather than purposefully created slanted eyes with negative meanings attached to them, the article roughly concluded that Chinese people only like models with big eyes as proof of the previous assertion in the subtitle. Without diving into the analysis of whether the racist slant-eyed imagery does exist in those images that are criticised by the Chinese people, the article shifts the topic by quoting some scholars to prove that narrow eyes are once preferred in China but now big eyes are preferred, that drags the minds of the readers back to the assertion in the subtitle. Finally, a call for people to have more tolerance towards people who look different ends the article.

Discourse is a body of constructed knowledge that is naturally considered to be true. It substantiates its own legitimacy and righteousness by providing its trueness and explanation. With that presumption, discourse denies being interpreted by anyone but itself. This article is structured around a foregone conclusion that the disparaging slant-eyed imagery designed for Chinese people does not exist and what the Chinese people criticised is “small” or “narrow” eyes. In that way, Chinese people’s protest against the lack of aesthetic pluralism is redefined as the rejection of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

aesthetic pluralism. Just like the defences from Chinese people against the offences from the Western countries were redefined by the western countries as the offences from Chinese people to the Western countries during the Qing Dynasty. The article treats opinions and beliefs as facts so that its own version of the truth is constructed. Selective reporting, equivocation, twisting the context, and establishing false correlations between irrelevant things are all methods used to build the sophistry of the article so that the threat, caused by the criticism from Chinese people, to the slant-eyed imagery as discourse will be neutralised. One cannot criticise something that does not exist. It is highly unlikely such a lame news article could be explained as simply lousy journalistic work, but it could be explained as a part of the mechanism of discourse perpetuating itself.

Summary

The slant-eyed imagery has been internalised by society and became a part of its structure, thus the discourse. It acts through social norms that everyone is subjected to and controls people's behaviours. Just like Foucault once said:

‘power is not ... on individual's domination over others or that of one group or class over others...social groups domination over others or that of one group or class over others... Rather power must be analysed as something which circulates ... which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never in anybody's hands⁴⁸’.

If we cannot realise it as a power that imposes itself on us from a higher societal level, we will eventually be consumed by it and become a part of it.

⁴⁸ Foucault, M. (1980). Two Lectures Lecture One: 7 January 1976. P.98

CONCLUSION

A person may be born with big eyes, a person may be born with small eyes, a person may be born with narrow eyes, and a person may be born with round eyes. No matter what size and shape of eyes a person has, people can make many different styles out of them. This article, by examining pictorial and textual materials methodologically, proves that there is imagery or a genre specially designed to depict the Chinese people in the creation of cultural products from Western societies. In that imagery, the Chinese are always made to look like they have extremely slanted eyes, which is something that Asians are always believed to have in the racial stereotypes of Westerners. The visual language is usually manipulated to make the Chinese people depicted in that imagery look exotic, bizarre, unfamiliar, cunning, vicious, mysterious, incommunicable, rich, conservative, deceptive, ageless, dirty, greedy, uncivilised, savage, lawless, primitive, patriarchal, immoral, or dangerous to the viewers. And despite China having a history of over 5000 years and 26 dynasties, only the connection with Qing Dynasty will appear together with the purposeful design of slanted eyes and overzealous use of cultural icons that are usually lamely copied and used in a wrong way. During the Qing dynasty, China was grievously invaded by the Western colonising forces. In that historical context, the Chinese people were considered to be an inferior race to the Caucasians. Hence, a myth was subsequently created by the use of slant-eyed imagery that became a genre in the depictions of Chinese people cooked up from a Western point of view. That myth dehumanises and objectifies Chinese people and made them into something lesser than a human being. Thus, a binary opposition in identities, a classification system, and a social hierarchy based on race are built to decide what kind of people are naturally considered superior, and thus have privileges. The association with a negative context is why the Chinese think the slant-eyed imagery is racist, offensive, and disparaging. The production of this imagery is not only a problem with Dior, nor is it only a problem with the Western fashion industry. This is not only even a problem of our times. This is a social problem that has a history of hundreds of years of colonial history that has a solid foundation in the entire Western society. It is postcolonialism projecting itself in our contemporary world. By shaping people's beliefs, perceptions, aesthetic values, and social norms, the slant-eyed imagery globally became the discourse that normalises people's behaviour according to it as a dominating power from a higher social level. The power dynamics created by such discourse are efficient in preventing themselves from changing and collapsing. The racially defined concepts of

"we" and "you" are pervasive in this highly Western-centric power mechanism, and as long as this conceptual difference of race persists, discrimination could happen.

The nature of discrimination is never really about whether the description of it is accurate or not, it is about a presumed, fixed, and taken-for-granted hierarchy to distinguish progressiveness from regressiveness, civilisation from barbarism, and superiority from inferiority. And that hierarchy is always used to oppress and insult a group of people for no reason. "The slanted eyes are ugly" this prejudgment is clearly discriminatory. But when it is a universally existing premise established by a series of historical and cultural contexts, the form of the discrimination could be the blunt discrimination from the general public, the kitsch and exaggerative imitation of the slanted eyes, or the unconscious or conscious borrowing from the kitsch and exaggerative imitation of slanted eyes. We live in a world full of signs and symbols among which some of them are perceived and interpreted to be racially offensive. This article gave an example of how such signs and symbols should be understood in their cultural and historical backgrounds. It encourages us to ask for common ground while reserving differences, look at problems from a developmental perspective, respect cultural differences, reject historical nihilism, challenge the authority, and learn to think outside the established framework of ideology and knowledge system. To object to something that is considered to be racist, we must expose its existence first. And we should understand it comprehensively so that we will know what exactly is objecting to and why we should resist it. The process of that intellectual inquiry might be counterintuitive sometimes. One must be able to say what she/he means if she/he wants to mean what she/he says.

This article does have some limitations of its own. First of all, the author of this article is Chinese. Despite efforts that have been made to maintain a relatively neutral position in the construction of this essay free from the previously owned value orientations of the author, some analyses and interpretations have been made inevitable from the perspective of the Chinese cultural background. The interpretations of meanings from a Western perspective in this thesis all resulted from literature readings. Secondly, the methodologies used in the thesis are less controlled and more interpretive since this article has to investigate the state of mind and consciousness. Finally, the article tries to talk about a huge topic from a small and specific perspective. Marginal deviations in the effects that slant-eyed imagery has on different cultural groups, industries, or countries may exist. There are also some points for further research. This article tries to interpret the slant-eyed imagery in the Chinese background. The slant-eyed imagery is something the Westerners used against the pan-

Asian area or against people of Asian ancestry. What variations the slant-eyed imagery has when it comes to other countries that have different cultural and historical backgrounds like Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.? There are also some other stereotypes in the Western countries against Asians such as them being nerdy, being strict with the rules, and such. How do those stereotypes coexist with the slant-eyed imagery? The interpretations of the slant-eyed imagery from the people of Western cultural backgrounds are also worth investigating.

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