Eastern Empires and Middle Kingdoms: Austria and China in Hofmannsthal and Kafka’s Orientalist Fictions

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Apart from the title of “empire”, Habsburg Austria and Manchu China would seem to have little in common. Yet nineteenth-century satirists used China as a metaphor for Austria in order to critique the decadence, authoritarianism and political stagnation of Europe’s “middle kingdom”. While the German poet Ludwig Börne was the first to condemn Austria as “the European China”, it was, not surprisingly, a native son, Franz Grillparzer, who produced the first sustained allegory on this theme, disguising various Habsburg Emperors as Oriental despot in order to lampoon their regimes. However, the Sino-Austrian connection represented more than the Enlightenment ruse of masking social critique as exotic travelogue. In his book Franz Kafka aus Prag, Jiri Grusa stresses this political analogy, claiming that Kafka’s Chinese metaphors are nothing exotic given “the ‘Confucian’ institutions of the Habsburg Empire,” “its mandarin civil service” and “almost ‘Chinese’ idolatry of the state” (10).

I should stress at this stage that I do not intend to examine whether Manchu China really epitomized anachronistic and corrupt despotism, as much of contemporary Europe believed. Instead I will contextualize within contemporary political and racial discourses two Orientalist texts from the Habsburg fin-de-siècle, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s poem “The Emperor of China speaks” (1897) and Franz Kafka’s story “The Great Wall of China” (1917). For these works invoke the Sino-Austrian connection not merely for satirical effect, but rather to critique received notions of national and ethnic identity and thus question the fundamental legitimacy of their own “eastern empire” (the literal meaning of Österreich in German.)

Although “The Emperor of China speaks” is a monologue by a monomaniacal speaker, Hofmannsthal deftly subverts the Emperor’s pretensions. We are thus

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1 Cf. Meng, 17 and Grillparzer, 1219.
2 “Nachrichten aus Cochinchina” in Grillparzer, 93-95. Note that the setting of Cochinchina (a Chinese vassal state belonging to Vietnam) was originally China itself, and that the term “Chinese” remains unchanged on page 95. Grillparzer seems unsure whether to represent Austria as a despotic empire or merely as a satellite of one.
3 Indeed, as Rolf Goebel explains, Western thinkers such as Herder, Schelling and Marx invoke the image of a mummified corpse to describe the petrification of the Chinese polity. See Goebel, 20 and 22.
obliged to note the title, i.e. that the text represents a subjective utterance from a highly biased source. Indeed, our suspicions are raised by the monarch’s first sentence in which he places himself at the epicentre of the universe and claims divine status: “In the middle of all things/ I, the Son of Heaven, dwell.” In Max Weber’s typology this claim to authority is based on “charismatic grounds”, on “devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person”. (328) However, just a few lines later the sovereign confuses the issue by invoking his dead ancestors (l. 6), thus appealing in Weber’s terms to “traditional authority”. (Ibid.) Admittedly, European monarchs, including generations of Habsburgs, successfully combined the charismatic notion of divine right with the traditional concept of dynastic succession. But here the specific claim to divine lineage in the epithet “Son of Heaven” is undermined by the reference to his deceased forebears lying below. In this way Hofmannsthal subtly invokes the Habsburg monarch Franz Josef, whose claim to divine right appeared tenuous by 1897 and whose authority derived largely from personal longevity.

Elsewhere in the poem Hofmannsthal undermines his speaker’s claims of omnipotence. The weapons with which the Emperor’s ancestors are buried (l. 7), along with the present sovereign’s references to his “warriors” (l. 36) and “subjugated peoples” (l. 39), indicate that the emperor’s rule has always faced challenges. More importantly, the concentric walls, mentioned with increasing frequency in the course of the poem, are revealed as “protective enclosures” that delimit the emperor’s power (Martens, 118). However, the sea, which the monarch considers the final wall, reverses the paradigm by besieging rather than protecting the empire and its sovereign (l. 42). The expansive movement that has characterized the whole poem collapses in the final sentence, which reduces the Emperor to a grammatical and ontological object, an individuated “me”, thus suggesting that his pretensions to omnipotence were merely a solipsistic fantasy.

Of course, the concentric barriers found in Hofmannsthal’s China are nothing like the Great Wall itself, which is a single, linear structure. Here Hofmannsthal’s topography is inspired by another, more local, imperial construction project. The Viennese Ringstraße development, begun in 1857, encircled the old city with several wide boulevards. The project received the personal approval of the Emperor Franz Josef, for whom it performed a twofold function. On the one hand, the construction fortified the imperial center, protecting it from the unruly proletariat in the suburbs. On the other, it extended the Emperor’s influence through his patronage of new institutions such as theatres, museums and opera houses that bore the stamp of the Imperial Court. Thus the concentric walls of Hofmannsthal’s poem, which fulfill a similar

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4 Cf. Schorske, 30.
5 Cf. Schorske, 38.
dialectic of constriction and expansion, correspond to the reality of Habsburg Austria rather than that of Manchu China.

Nowhere is this correlation more apparent than in Hofmannsthal’s exploration of the racial tensions afflicting his fictional empire. For it is the Chinese Emperor’s fear of ethnic diversity that is the real impetus behind the protective walls. Indeed, he is so disturbed by his vision of “the faces of many peoples” (l. 24), that he promptly retreats to the comforting inner circle of the nobility (l. 25). The word “peoples” recurs four times in the final two sentences (ll. 35-42). Although the Emperor is initially able to reinscribe his possession of these groups as his warriors and his farmers (ll.35-6), “Those subjugated peoples/ Peoples of ever more torpid blood,” resist assimilation (ll.39-40). The emperor regards himself as the embodiment of an ethnic purity that is progressively diluted the further his vision moves from the centre. If we read China as an allegorical representation of the Habsburg Empire, then the Emperor expresses the ethnic and cultural anxieties of a ruling minority that faced increasingly strident calls for self-determination from its various “subjugated peoples”. Thus Hofmannsthal gives the lie to the “Habsburg myth”, the notion that each of the ethnic groups subscribed to a supranational Austrian identity, by exposing the ethno-nationalist ethos at the heart of the empire.

In many respects Franz Kafka’s short story “The Great Wall of China” represents the antithesis of Hofmannsthal’s poem. Hofmannsthal’s Emperor speaks from the centre of the realm and personifies the institution of empire. Conversely, Kafka’s narrator writes from the periphery of the realm on its arcane institutions. By placing these two works in dialogue with each other, we can uncover a submerged discourse on Habsburg imperialism and national identity conveyed through Orientalist allegories. For if in Hofmannsthal’s poem the Emperor speaks, then in Kafka’s story the empire writes back.

Kafka’s text presents itself as a report on the construction of the wall and the people’s relationship with their Emperor. Throughout the story Kafka imbues his narrator’s naïve statements with a delicate, yet unmistakable irony. In this way the author subverts the unspoken assumptions that inform the narrator’s concept of national identity in the fields of ethnology, geography and history.

As in Hofmannsthal’s poem, xenophobia plays an important role in the imperial building project. The wall is ostensibly designed to keep out the northern nomads whom the Chinese regard as terrifying sub-humans:

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6 This makes it all the more remarkable that so few critics have sought to compare these two works. To my knowledge, Heinz Politzer’s article “Zwei kaiserliche Botschaften: zu den Texten von Hofmannsthal und Kafka” offers the only attempt to do so.
The faithful representations of the artist show us these faces of the damned, their gaping mouths, their jaws furnished with great pointed teeth, their half-shut eyes that already seem to be seeking out the victim that their jaws will rend and devour. (241)

However, Kafka deconstructs the binary opposition between the civilized Chinese and the barbaric northerners. Firstly, he emphasizes the mediated nature of the information concerning the northern peoples. As the narrator admits, no one in the south has ever seen these tribes and therefore no one can verify whether these book illustrations are really “faithful”. Indeed, the locals’ use of these images as bogeymen to discipline unruly children suggests that these visions are merely phantoms of their own making. Secondly, Kafka blurs the distinction between the sedentary Chinese and the migratory northerners by describing how the construction of the wall obliges young building supervisors to adopt a nomadic lifestyle (237-238). Finally, the image of the monstrous northerners has a dear extra-diegetic referent in the “yellow peril”, a racist conception of East Asians as marauding invaders that arose in the West at the turn of the nineteenth century. By depicting the Chinese themselves as proponents of the “yellow peril” myth, Kafka parodies racist discourse.

However, if the Chinese people’s knowledge of the Other is mediated, then so is their self-identity. Here the Chinese children’s reaction to the pictures of the northerners is instructive. They fling themselves weeping into their parents’ arms (241). This was precisely the reaction of the narrator and his fellow nursery school pupils when their teacher, instructing them in the officially sanctioned science of architecture, knocked down their first attempts to build a wall (238). Through the repetition of this gesture Kafka shows how the Chinese leadership unifies the nation through the external threat of the northern tribes and the internal goal of building the wall. Indeed, as the narrator investigates the origins of the project, it becomes clear that the leadership’s primary objective is the inculcation of national pride. He comes across an early study of the structure, which maintains that the Great Wall was the foundation for a new Tower of Babel. Significantly, this book contains only “nebulous plans” for the final, unimaginable structure, but detailed proposals for “mobilizing the people’s energies” (239). In Max Weber’s terminology, the project ceases to be zweckrational, orientated toward a particular, individual goal (i.e. the fortification of the nation) and becomes wertrational orientated toward an absolute value, here national pride. Writing in

7 My reading of the wall as an attempt to inculcate national pride is based upon the priorities revealed here. Of course, may critics have preferred to interpret the structure metaphorically. For example, both Clement Greenberg and Ritchie Robertson view the wall as the Torah and the Chinese as the Jews. On the other hand, Wolf Kittler and John M. Kopper employ language rather than religion as their point of reference, interpreting the Wall as a meta-linguistic or a meta-narrative construct respectively.
1917, Kafka received daily reminders from the European battlefields of how costly this particular value could be.

It is therefore not surprising that Kafka should subvert the following speech, in which the narrator exults in the patriotic pride experienced by the young building supervisors as they travel about the country with great fanfare:

Every fellow countryman was a brother for whom one was building a wall of protection, and who would return life-long thanks for it with all that he had and did. Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a ring of brothers, a current of blood no longer confined within the narrow circulation of one body, but sweetly rolling and yet ever returning throughout the endless leagues of China. (238)

Unlike Hofmannsthal’s Emperor, who presents himself as the single embodiment of racial purity, Kafka’s narrator envisions a blood bond that unifies all his people. However, the grotesque image of “the current of blood” pulsing through the nation suggests the horrifying carnage that such ideals entail. Thus Kafka undermines the contemporary ethno-nationalist discourse in the very act of its articulation.

“Blut und Boden” (“Blood and soil”) was of course a nationalist cri-de-coeur long before its adoption by the Nazis. However, Kafka complicates the relationship between the Chinese and their land by describing China as simply too enormous to comprehend. On the one hand, the expansiveness of China renders the issue of defence moot since no invader from the north could ever reach the narrator’s southeastern village (241). Instead of the population defending their country, it is the land that protects them. On the other hand, the sheer vastness of the country prevents any effective communication between the imperial metropole of Peking and the narrator’s remote community. Even though any message from the centre is obsolete long before it reaches the periphery, for the local people this ancient history has all the force of the latest news (245). Yet if a government official should stray into this region, the locals would treat his proclamations as if they had been issued by a long-dead Emperor whose dynasty is now extinct (ibid.). The narrator’s community lives in a state of ahistorical simultaneity similar to that which Benedict Anderson attributes to medieval society in his book “Imagined Communities” (24). Here Anderson describes the anachronistic art of the Middle Ages that depicts the Nativity with shepherds resembling “Burgundian peasants” and the Virgin Mary “figured as a Tuscan merchant’s daughter” (22). Like the artists of the Middle Ages, Kafka’s Chinese have not developed the concept of what Walter Benjamin terms “homogenous, empty time” (Anderson, 24). According to Anderson, this change in the Western view of history is vital to the development of a national consciousness, since it replaces the Medieval version of simultaneity, based on the eschatological model of prefigurement and fulfilment, with a secular model in which events take place.
concurrently within the same national matrix. Thus the geographical expanse of Kafka’s China warps the population’s notion of history to such an extent that a modern national consciousness cannot develop.

But this is not quite the whole story. In the most famous passage of the text, the parable describing a message from a dying emperor that never reaches its addressee, Kafka offers a more nuanced vision of national consciousness. Significantly, Kafka published this passage as a separate text under the title “An Imperial Message”, thus removing any references to China. This is appropriate, given that the passage offers, with astonishing concision, a brief history of the Western world. In its play of light and darkness, the opening sentence invokes the foundational moment of Western philosophy, Plato’s cave: “The Emperor… has sent a message to you, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone.” (244) This “imperial sun” is then transformed into a sign, the insignia emblazoned on the messenger’s chest, which, in Copernican fashion, abandons its central position. Yet the enlightenment promised by the symbol of the sun never arrives. Although the messenger is a “powerful” and “indefatigable man” he is paradoxically trapped in the endless palaces at the core of the realm, which evoke the suffocating and omnipresent bureaucracy of the Habsburg Empire. Nevertheless, while the messenger never arrives, the lowly subject can intuit the content of the message: “But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.” (244) Thus Kafka reverses the trajectory of Hofmannsthal’s poem: national identity does not radiate from the centre outwards or from the top down, but flows upwards and inwards from the lowly periphery to the illustrious core of the realm. While the second-person address, which encompasses the reader, emphasizes the emancipatory nature of the conclusion, the setting of the sun in the final line suggests that this “imagined community” is no longer the product of enlightened reason. Thus Kafka both heralds and critiques the rise of the modern, individuated, national consciousness.

In conclusion, Hofmannsthal and Kafka offer valuable insights into the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and its foundational myth of supranational Austrian allegiance. For if the ethno-nationalism of Hofmannsthal’s Emperor excludes the various minorities of the realm, then, as Kafka’s lowly subject demonstrates, one is free to imagine one’s own version of national identity. Thus for their Habsburg audience these ostensibly exotic “Chinese” texts offer some disconcerting home truths.
Der Kaiser von China spricht

1  In der Mitte aller Dinge
   Wohne Ich, der Sohn des Himmels.
   Meine Frauen, meine Bäume,
   Meine Tiere, meine Teiche
5  Schließt die erste Mauer ein.
   Drunten liegen meine Ahnen:
   Aufgebahrt mit ihren Waffen,
   Ihre Kronen auf den Häuptern,
   Wie es einem jeden ziemt,
10 Wohnen sie in den Gewölben.
   Bis ins Herz der Welt hinunter
   Dröhnt das Schreiten meiner Hoheit.
   Stumm von meinen Rasenbänken,
   15 Grünen Schemeln meiner Füße,
   Gehen gleichgeteilte Ströme
   Osten-, west- und süd- und nordwärts,
   Meinen Garten zu bewässern,
   Der die weite Erde ist.
20 Spiegeln hier die dunkeln Augen,
   Bunten Schwingen meiner Tiere,
   Spiegeln draußen bunte Städte,
   Dunkle Mauern, dichte Wälder
   Und Gesichter vieler Völker.
25 Meine Edlen, wie die Sterne,
   Wohnen rings um mich, sie haben
   Namen, die ich ihnen gab,
   Namen nach der einen Stunde,
   Da mir einer näher kam,
30 Frauen, die ich ihnen schenkte,
   Und den Scharen ihrer Kinder ;
   Allen Edlen dieser Erde
   Schuf ich Augen, Wuchs und Lippen,
   Wie der Gärtner an den Blumen.
35 Aber zwischen äußern Mauern
   Wohnen Völker meiner Krieger,
   Völker meine Ackerbauer.
   Neue Mauer und dann wieder
   Jene unterworfnen Völker,
40 Völker immer dumpfern Blutes,
   Bis ans Meer, die letzte Mauer,
   Die mein Reich und mich umlagert.

(Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. Gesammelte Werke
in zehn Einzelbänden. Gedichte Dramen I. 50-
51.)

The Emperor of China Speaks

In the middle of all things
I, the Son of Heaven, dwell.
My women, my trees,
My animals and my ponds
Are enclosed by the first wall.
Below my ancestors lie
In state with their weapons,
Their crowns upon their heads,
As befits every one of them,
They dwell in the vaults.
Down into the heart of the earth,
My majestic tread resounds.
Silently from my grassy banks,
My green footstools,
Flow the equally divided streams
North, south, east and west,
To irrigate my garden,
Which is the wide earth.
They reflect here my animals’
Dark eyes and motley wings,
Outside they reflect the motley towns,
Dark walls, dense forests,
And the faces of many peoples.
My nobles, like the stars,
Live in my orbit, they have
Names which I gave them
In honour of the hour
When they came into my presence,
The women whom I bestowed on them,
And the hordes of children;
For all the nobles in this world
I created eyes, stature and lips,
As the gardener does with his flowers.
But between the outer walls
Dwell other peoples—my warriors,
More peoples—my farmers,
Followed by new walls and then again
Those subjugated peoples,
Peoples of ever more torpid blood,
On down to the sea, the last wall,
Which besieges my empire and me.

(My translation.)
Works Cited:


