

**Global Modernism Reconsidered:  
W. Somerset Maugham's Journey to the East**

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment for the  
requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in English

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Ray Zhou

18 June 2025

Dedicated to  
Dr Shaoyang Gu  
and  
W. Somerset Maugham

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## Abstract

This study recovers modernist themes and literary techniques of W. Somerset Maugham (1874–1965), a ‘popular’ British writer, from existing postcolonial (mis)reading of his Eastern fiction. It argues that Maugham’s intellectual and aesthetic connections with the East formulate his subtle but powerful critique of Western imperialism, providing a transcultural perspective of conceptualising the world and human life. Eastern philosophy plays a definitive role in Maugham’s literary experimentation with form and narrative.

The thesis begins by locating Maugham in the emerging scholarship of global modernism, mapping out his transnational life and non-conventional narrative strategies. It then conducts a strategic historical survey of East–West interconnectedness to build up a tripartite methodology: ‘East as Other’, ‘East as Reference’, and ‘East as Method’, proposing three models of how modern Western writers tend to view the East. Comparing Maugham’s fiction with that of James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and George Orwell, this thesis uncovers Maugham’s acute sense of global modernity from a European context to Eastern sites of Oceania and Asia. Specifically, this study examines Maugham’s philosophical connection with China and India, observing how Daoism assimilates into Maugham’s modernist aesthetics that undo binaries and overcome the limits of language, and how Indian schools of Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta have informed Maugham’s realisation of spiritual liberation in his three philosophical novels. Each chapter takes a cross-cultural approach with attention to both Western and Eastern cultural traditions.

This study covers a wide range of genres: novel, short story, play, memoir, essay, travel notes, literary criticism, and archival materials including unpublished manuscripts, letters, speeches, and Maugham’s annotated personal books, aiming to present a comprehensive survey of Maugham’s life and works in relation to global modernism.

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## Abbreviations

### Works by Maugham

#### BOOKS

##### Novels

<i>Of Human Bondage</i>	<i>HB</i>
<i>The Moon and Sixpence</i>	<i>MS</i>
<i>The Painted Veil</i>	<i>PV</i>
<i>The Narrow Corner</i>	<i>NC</i>
<i>The Razor's Edge</i>	<i>RE</i>
<i>The Hero</i>	<i>TH</i>
<i>The Magician</i>	<i>TM</i>
<i>Cakes and Ale</i>	<i>CA</i>
<i>The Merry-Go-Round</i>	<i>MGR</i>

##### Non-fiction

<i>On a Chinese Screen</i>	<i>OCS</i>
<i>The Gentleman in the Parlour</i>	<i>GP</i>
<i>The Summing Up</i>	<i>SU</i>
<i>A Writer's Notebook</i>	<i>WN</i>
<i>The Vagrant Mood</i>	<i>VM</i>
<i>Points of View</i>	<i>POV</i>
<i>Ten Novels and Their Authors</i>	<i>TNTA</i>

##### Collected Editions

<i>Collected Short Stories (Volumes 1, 2, 4)</i>	<i>CSS 1, 2, 4</i>
<i>Collected Plays (Volume 3)</i>	<i>CP 3</i>

#### SHORT STORIES

Rain	R
Honolulu	H
Mackintosh	M
The Pool	P
The Book-bag	B
The Outstation	O

The Taipan	T
Neil MacAdam	NM
The Alien Corn	AC
The Door of Opportunity	DO
The Force of Circumstance	FC
The Fall of Edward Barnard	FEB

## PLAY

East of Suez	ES
--------------	----

## ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Manuscripts

The Fugitive	TF
1930, The National Library of Australia, NLA MS 219.	
The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey	ATSC 1–2
1897–1898, The Library of Congress, <i>W. Somerset Maugham Papers</i> , Box 2, Reel 1–2 (Restricted). Vols. 1–2.	
Of Human Bondage (Vol. 16)	HB 16
1911–1914, The Library of Congress, <i>W. Somerset Maugham Papers</i> , Box 4, Reel 3–4. Vol. 16	
On a Chinese Screen	“OCS” MS
1922, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, <i>W. Somerset Maugham Collection</i> , Box 3, Folder 34. GEN MSS 263.	

Letters

10 Letters from Maugham to Christopher Isherwood	Letters to
1943–1959, The Huntington Library, <i>Christopher Isherwood papers</i> , Box 64, CI 1786–1795.	Isherwood
5 Letters from Christopher Isherwood to Maugham	Letters to
1938–1956, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, <i>Maugham Collection</i> , Box 1, Folder 74.	Maugham

All transcriptions of archival materials are mine and cited as per library regulations.

### Others' works

#### SCHOPENHAUER

<i>The World as Will and Representation</i> (translated by Payne, 1958)	<i>WWR</i>
<i>The World as Will and Representation (Vols. 1, 2)</i> (translated by Norman, 2010)	<i>WWR 1, 2</i>
<i>Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays (Vol. 2)</i>	<i>PP 2</i>

#### GEORGE ORWELL

<i>The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell</i>	<i>CE</i>
<i>Burmese Days</i>	<i>BD</i>
Shooting an Elephant	<i>SE</i>
A Hanging	<i>AH</i>

#### VIRGINIA WOOLF

<i>To the Lighthouse</i>	<i>TL</i>
<i>Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown</i>	<i>MBMB</i>
Modern Fiction	<i>MF</i>

#### S. RADHAKRISHNAN

Introduction of <i>The Principal Upanishads</i>	Introduction
<i>Indian Philosophy (Vol.1, 2)</i>	<i>IP 1, 2</i>

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## Chronology<sup>1</sup>

W. Somerset Maugham – a life

1874, 25 January	Born at the British Embassy in Paris.
1882	Death of his mother Edith Mary Maugham.
1884	Death of his father Robert Ormond Maugham. W. Somerset Maugham is sent to live with his uncle Henry Macdonald Maugham and aunt Sophia in Whitstable, Kent.
1885	Attends junior annexe of the King's School, Canterbury.
1888	Enrols in the King's School with a scholarship. Suffers from a bad attack of pleurisy and is sent to Hyeres, near Toulon in the south of France, for recuperation.
1889	Leaves the King's School.
1890	Studies at Heidelberg University as an auditing student, lives in a professor's apartment, attends Kuno Fischer's lectures on Schopenhauer, reads philosophy, French and German literature.
1891	Befriends John Ellingham Brooks, reads Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, watches Ibsen's plays. Returns to Whitstable after one year's stay in Germany.
1892	Enrols in St Thomas' Hospital, London, as a medical student. Death of his aunt Sophia.
1894–95	Occasional travels in Italy.
1896	Works as an obstetric clerk in the slums of Lambeth.
1897	Publication of his first novel <i>Liza of Lambeth</i> by Fisher Unwin. Death of his uncle Henry Macdonald Maugham. Completes his medical degree, decides to be a writer, not a doctor.
1898–1899	Settles down in Seville, Spain, for a year, and writes 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey', unpublished.
1901	Publication of <i>The Hero</i> by Hutchinson.
1902	Publication of <i>Mrs Craddock</i> by Heinemann.
1903	Maugham's first play, <i>A Man of Honour</i> , is performed by the Stage Society; serves as the co-editor of <i>The Venture</i> .
1904–05	Lives a Bohemian life in Paris with Harry Philips, studies painting, befriends Gerald Kelly, attends artist gatherings at Le Chat Blanc restaurant with Roderic O'Connor, Clive Bell, among others.

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the chronology in Frederic Raphael, *Somerset Maugham*. Cardinal, 1989, pp.118–119. While Raphael doesn't specify Maugham's Eastern travels but generalises them as 'visit to the South Seas' and 'a decade of travelling in the Far East', I clarify the time and places. Details of Maugham's travels are based on two recent biographies: Selina Hastings, *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham: A Biography*. 1st US ed., Random House, 2010, and Jeffrey Meyers, *Somerset Maugham: A Life*. Knopf, 2004. I also consult archival materials from the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University and the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre at Boston University, as well as Maugham's memoirs: *The Summing Up*, *A Writer's Notebook*, and *Looking Back*.

1907	The play <i>Lady Frederick</i> brings great success and fortune.
1908	Publication of <i>The Magician</i> .
1910	Visits the United States for the first time, staying in New York, Boston, Washington D.C.
1911–1914	Dedicates himself to writing <i>Of Human Bondage</i> .
1914–15	During the war, after serving with the Red Cross Ambulance Unit in France, Maugham is recruited into Military Intelligence and takes up a posting in Geneva.
1915	Publication of <i>Of Human Bondage</i> .
1916	Journey to the South Seas with Gerald Haxton. Visits Hawaii, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, New Zealand, and Tahiti. Discovery of Gauguin panels. On his return Maugham marries Syrie.
1917	Maugham was sent to St Petersburg by British Intelligence in an attempt to bolster the Provisional Government of Kerensky. On his return from Russia, he enters Banchory Sanatorium, Aberdeen, Scotland, to treat pulmonary tuberculosis.
1919	Publication of <i>The Moon and Sixpence</i> .
1919–1920	Journey to China with Gerald Haxton. Visits major cities: Hong Kong, Shanghai, Peking, Shenyang (Mukden), and countryside. Sails by a sampan along the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, for fifteen hundred miles, visiting Chengdu and Chongqing.
1921	Travels in Honolulu, Australia (Sydney, Adelaide, Darwin, Thursday Island), Banda-Neira Islands, Singapore, Malay Archipelago, and North Borneo with Gerald Haxton. Publication of <i>Trembling of a Leaf</i> .
1922	Publication of <i>On a Chinese Screen</i> , performance of <i>East of Suez</i> .
1922–23	Extensive treks in Southeast Asia with Gerald Haxton: Burma, Siam, Shan States, Indochina, visiting major cities: Bangkok, Rangoon, Pagan, Mandalay, Thazi, Taunggyi, Hanoi, Haiphong.
1924–25	Visit to Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean: Cuba, Guatemala, Yucatan, Jamaica, Honduras.
1925	Publication of <i>The Painted Veil</i> .
1925–26	Second visit to Southeast Asia with Gerald Haxton: Singapore, Bangkok, British Malaya, Borneo, Brunei, Manila.
1926	Publication of <i>The Casuarina Tree</i> .
1927	Maugham and Syrie divorce.
1928	Buys the Villa Mauresque on Cap Ferrat, Southern France. Publication of <i>Ashenden</i> .
1930	Publication of <i>Cakes and Ale</i> and <i>The Gentleman in the Parlour</i> .
1932	Publication of <i>The Narrow Corner</i> .
1933	Publication of <i>Ah King</i> .
1936	Visit to the West Indies with Gerald Haxton: Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Trinidad, and South America: French Guiana. After this, they visit again British Malaya.

1938	Visit to India: Bombay, Goa, Trivandrum, Madura, then north to Madras, to Hyderabad, up to Bidar and Nagpur in the interior, then to Calcutta, Benares, Agra, Jaipur, and Delhi. A second visit, planned for the following year, is prevented by the outbreak of war. Publication of <i>The Summing Up</i> .
1939	Visit to France in wartime; writes a private report for the Ministry of Information on the attitude of the French toward their British allies, and a series of propaganda articles in newspapers. Publication of <i>Christmas Holiday</i> .
1940	Leaves London in air raid, takes plane to Lisbon, and boards a clipper for the United States where he remains for the duration of the war, wintering at Parker's Ferry, Yemassee, South Carolina, and spending the summers at Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard.
1941	Publication of <i>Strictly Personal</i> .
1944	Publication of <i>The Razor's Edge</i> . Death of Gerald Haxton.
1946	Presentation of <i>Of Human Bondage</i> to the Library of Congress. Return to the Villa Mauresque with Alan Searle. Foundation of the Somerset Maugham Award.
1948	Publication of <i>Ten Novels and Their Authors</i> .
1949	Publication of <i>A Writer's Notebook</i> , dedicated to Gerald Haxton.
1950	Presentation of 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey' manuscripts to the Library of Congress.
1951	Presentation of 'The Fugitive' ( <i>The Narrow Corner</i> ) manuscripts to the National Library of Australia.
1952	Awarded Doctorate by Oxford University. Foundation of the Maugham Library at the King's School, Canterbury, and decision to be buried in school after his death.
1955	Death of Syrie.
1958	Publication of <i>Points of View</i> .
1959–60	Final visit to Asia with Alan Searle: spending a month in Japan (Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto), revisiting Singapore, Saigon, Manila, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Rangoon.
1962	Auction of his impressionist painting collection. Publishes reproduction of these paintings: <i>Purely for My Pleasure</i> . Serialisation of his controversial autobiography <i>Looking Back</i> .
1965, 16 December	Dies in Cap Ferrat.

# World Map



Map created via Google My Maps, [link here](#), annotated, last edit 4 January 2025. Copyright the author.

ANTARCTICA

## W. Somerset Maugham's East (Notes on the World Map<sup>2</sup>)

### Oceania

#### South Seas

1. The old term for the Pacific Ocean (Oxford Reference)
2. In plural. The seas of the southern hemisphere; esp. the South Pacific Ocean. Also: the islands in these seas; spec. Polynesia. (*OED*)

#### Polynesia (obsolete)

1. A name for the numerous islands in the Pacific Ocean east of Australia and the Malay Archipelago (*OED*)
2. This word is now obsolete. It is only recorded in the 1880s. (*OED*)

#### Maugham's Oceania:

Tahiti, Samoa, Apia, Pago-Pago, Honolulu, Australia, New Zealand.

### Southeast Asia

#### Malay Archipelago

A very large group of islands, including Sumatra, Java, Borneo, the Philippines, and New Guinea, lying between the mainland of Southeast Asia and Australia. They constitute the bulk of the area formerly known as the East Indies. (*OED*)

#### Malaya (obsolete)

A former country in Southeast Asia, consisting of the southern part of the Malay peninsula and some adjacent islands (originally including Singapore), now forming the western part of the Federation of Malaysia, and known as West Malaysia. (Oxford Reference)

#### Maugham's Southeast Asia:

Thailand (Siam), Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam (Indochina), Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Philippines, Indonesia.

### Maugham's East Asia

Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan

### Maugham's South Asia

India

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<sup>2</sup> Major Eastern locations on Maugham's World Map, including the old names and today's names.

## Notes on the use of non-English names and terms

The usage of Chinese names and terms in academic English writing can be challenging due to the significant cultural differences between Chinese/Sinophone and English/Anglophone languages and naming practices. One of the most substantial differences is in the writing convention for names. In Chinese/Sinophone practice, the family name (surname) is customarily listed first, while the English/Anglophone norm is to state the given name first and the family name last. It is also noteworthy that Mandarin-Chinese and other Sinophone languages (such as Cantonese) have different romanisation systems for the same Chinese characters. In other specific countries and regions (such as Taiwan), Chinese names are commonly written in Wade-Giles. The difficulty of dealing with Chinese/Sinophone names can be further compounded by the experiences of colonisation, migration, diaspora, and globalisation. Some (overseas) Chinese people adopt the Anglophone naming convention that places their given names first, include their English given names, or even replace their Chinese given names with the English ones.

In this thesis, most romanisation of Chinese names and terms follows *pinyin* spelling. In some circumstances, the names and terms are accompanied with historically known spelling in parentheses at their first mentioning. The order of a Chinese person's surname and given name is specified in the following three categories:

### 1. Historical figures

**Surname + Given name** in *pinyin*, alternative/previous spelling noted in parentheses.

Examples: Li Bai (Li Po), Zheng He (Cheng Ho), Xu Guangqi ('Paul' Hsu Kuang-ch'i), Gu Hongming (Ku Hung-ming), Song Chunfang (T. F. Soong), Xiao Qian (Hsiao Chien), Xu Zhimo (C. H. Hsu), Qian Zhongshu (Chung-shu Ch'ien).

**Revered name** only in *pinyin* or recognised English spelling for ancient philosophers.

Examples: Laozi, Zhuangzi, Confucius, Mencius.

## 2. Contemporary scholars

**Given name + Surname**, referring to the name in their published works.

Examples: Zhaoming Qian, Longxi Zhang, Zong-qi Cai, Lydia H. Liu, Leo Ou-fan Lee, David Der-wei Wang, Ming Dong Gu.

## 3. Fictional characters

**Given name + Surname** as in print.

This specifically refers to Lee Tai Cheng in Maugham's play *East of Suez* (1922). Unlike most contemporary scholars who take Lee as his surname, I refer to 'Lee Tai' as his given name and 'Cheng' as the last name, because in the playscript, all characters' names in stage instruction appear in their first names. (See Chapter Two.)

Places are mentioned in **current names in *pinyin***; for example, I use 'Beijing', not 'Peking'. Historical/official names follow old spelling; for example, Peking University.

A further challenge in this thesis is the translation of Chinese terms related to ancient philosophy and aesthetics. In most cases, English translations are provided with the phonetic notation of Chinese characters (*pinyin*) in parentheses; for example, *Literary Mind and Carving Dragon* (*Wenxin Diaolong*) and landscape (*shanshui*) painting. In several cases, when English translations do not suffice to convey the key ideas of Chinese philosophy, traditional Chinese characters will be provided. Examples include equilibrium and harmony (中庸 *zhongyong*/Chung Yung), reserve (含蓄 *hanxu*), suggestion (暗示 *anshi*), and rhythmic vitality (氣韻生動 *qiyun shengdong*). Additionally, when mentioning Daoism, I do not translate the 'Dao' as 'the Way' (although Maugham used 'the Way') or provide Chinese characters, because the term 'Dao' is untranslatable, and its modern spelling has been widely used in English academic contexts.

In this thesis, most Chinese terms and texts are cited from recognised English sources with proper quotations or footnotes, except for a few occasions where I provide literal translations myself. In such cases, original Chinese characters are cited in the main text or footnotes.

A brief note on Indian terms: I use English romanisation and IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration) interchangeably and list both spellings in the Glossary at the end of the thesis.

Examples: Atman/Ātman, Jnana/Jñāna.

## Notes on punctuation, spelling and citation style

My prose in this thesis follows Australian English conventions for spelling, punctuation and grammar, in accordance with the *Australian Government Style Manual* and the *Macquarie Dictionary*.

### Punctuation

- **Quotation Marks:** Single quotation marks ( ‘ ’ ) are used for direct quotations, with double quotation marks ( “ ” ) for quotations within quotations.
- **Dashes:** Spaced en dashes ( – ) are used for parenthetical elements and number ranges, in line with Australian typographic norms. Em dashes ( — ) are avoided.
- **Honorifics:** Titles such as Mr, Mrs, Dr, and Ms are written without full stops.

### Spelling

- Australian English spelling is used throughout in my prose. This includes:
  - our endings (e.g., colour, honour)
  - ise rather than -ize (e.g., organise, recognise)

### Citations

All citations and references conform to the Modern Language Association (MLA) 9th edition style guide, combined with my list of abbreviations. Examples include:

- “Men hurried hither and thither, urged by forces they knew not; and the purpose of it all escaped them; they seemed to hurry just for hurrying’s sake” (*HB* 464).
- ... the taipan comes from a modest family, “a little red house in a long row of little red houses, in Barnes, a suburb” (T, *OCS* 122–23).

For titles of short stories, articles, manuscripts and poems, I follow Australian conventions in my prose (‘Single Quotation Marks’), but format in-text citations to MLA conventions (‘Double Quotation Marks’).

- In ‘The Outstation’, there is a farcical scene where...

- ... in the historic King's School, "widely regarded as the oldest school in England"  
(The King's School "History").

This hybrid approach maintains consistency with Australian editorial norms while ensuring that all citations conform to MLA requirements.

## Foreword

Aged 28, I have already lived twice.<sup>3</sup> My initial impetus to write this thesis was very personal. I first read W. Somerset Maugham at the tender age of eighteen, in 2015, when I was struggling with my gender identity against a conventional family and a stifling cultural background, meanwhile sacrificing my interest in literature to a major I did not like. I remember reading *The Moon and Sixpence* overnight in a hard-sleeper train cabin, heading north from Shanghai, where I just finished my first semester at university, to the major city closest to my hometown. Under the dim and unstable light between cabins that rocked with the rhythm of the train's motion, among the soundtrack mixed with snoring sound and unpleasant smells of smoke and sweat from other working-class passengers who could not afford flight tickets either, I finished reading the book.

I kept thinking of Maugham's hero in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Charles Strickland, who shuns all the expectations placed on him as a British stockbroker, who exiles himself in a faraway island, and who cares little about material security or public judgement, all in order to become an artist. In the following semester, I read *Of Human Bondage* covertly in an Economics class and was deeply moved by the British Museum chapters, where the protagonist Philip Carey comes to the epiphany that life has no definite meaning; every small decision one makes will weave into the unique and beautiful pattern of their own life. I read *The Razor's Edge* at a later critical time, when I was twenty-two: having finished my undergraduate thesis, I decided to 'loaf' for a year as the main character Larry Darrell does in the novel. I rented an apartment near the best university for Chinese literature in Shanghai, audited literary classes in the daytime and worked multiple part-time jobs in the

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<sup>3</sup> See my short memoir: Ray Zhou, "Living Twice." *Living Twice: The 2023 University of Sydney Anthology*, Sydney University Press, 2024. I'm currently working on a book-length memoir under the title 'Be Brave'.

nighttime, to support my literary dream and lead an independent life. No one then understood me.

I changed my major to English in my second undergraduate year, in September 2016. Since then, I started living on my own with income from various part-time jobs. Having gone through many catastrophic moments and the practical impediment of not having an ID that correctly reflects my gender, I survived. Encouraged by my fatherly caring undergraduate supervisor, I received formal education in English literature in Hong Kong and continue my journey here in Sydney, completing this PhD thesis on Maugham.

Most English departments in higher education institutions never mention Maugham in their curriculum. Rather, there is a tendency in literary criticism of debasing Maugham as a ‘popular’, ‘second-rate’ writer compared with his contemporaries James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. In my earlier years, those torturing moments of reflecting on my personal, gender and national identity enabled me to identify with Maugham’s heroes, mostly marginalised from mainstream society, who constantly seek an answer to the meaning of life: why, they ask, should a person stay alive, despite all the suffering?

Maugham’s early life is full of sufferings and constraints centring on the problem of identity. His personal liberation started from travels: firstly, Germany, France, Spain, and other European countries, and later, Malaya, Borneo, China, India, and other Asian territories. This travelling life was inscribed in his works, such as his descriptions of the Eastern landscape and autobiographical characters who find tranquillity and freedom in the East, while his true self, still traumatised, discreetly recedes behind the narrative.

This metaphorical self-seeking journey from West to East marks a radical difference from the Eurocentric narratives popular in Maugham’s times. The writer’s contemplations on his own sexual and national identity underpinned Maugham’s non-conventional attitudes towards British society and literary conventions, which develops into his cross-cultural conceptualisation and literary experiments. Maugham’s philosophical inquiries into human

existence in the critical time leading into and following the 1920s, I believe, respond equally to the existential themes in his contemporary modernist fiction exploring similar deep questions.

Maugham's 'Journey to the East' mirrors my own cross-cultural adventures. Like Maugham's liberation from his miserable childhood growing up in his uncle's vicarage in Whitstable, a seaside town in rural Kent, to multiple places in Asia and Oceania, I supported myself from a provincial hometown in Northeast China to Shanghai, Hong Kong, and now in Sydney, becoming an emerging literary researcher and memoir writer.

Therefore, Maugham's East becomes a destination of his search for the self, as written in his memoir: "I found beauty and romance, but I found also something I had never expected. I found a new self" (*SU* 193). The East is not static; it constantly and actively transforms the travelling writer and participates in his modernist narratives.

## Introduction

This study aims to position W. Somerset Maugham's East as the central site of his modernism. Surprisingly, few scholars have made significant effort to investigate the relation between Maugham's work and the larger discourse of literary modernism. Inspired by blooming scholarship on "New Modernist Studies" (Mao and Walkowitz, 2008) and "Global Modernisms" (Wollaeger, 2012), I argue that Maugham's works not only respond to the existential crisis in Europe in the twentieth century, but also experiment with, or invent, his own narrative strategies upon his reception of Eastern aesthetics and philosophy. Maugham's transnational experiences and poetics bear similarities with the emerging scholarly interest in East–West aesthetics in global modernist studies.

This thesis contends that Maugham's departure from English conventions and his engagement with Eastern material create new literary forms that are recognisable as modernist. My intervention in existing Maugham studies examines, or reexamines, Maugham's narrative components, such as playful language, symbolism, and philosophical themes in his fiction, along with his critical reflections on colonialism, religion, nationality, and Eurocentric literary tradition in his nonfictional works, combined with archival materials including unpublished novel manuscripts and letters. This comprehensive survey of Maugham's works aims to shed some new light on East–West comparative aesthetics and philosophy, Asian studies and new modernist studies.

This Introduction chapter has five sections. The first section introduces the conceptual orientation of my study in the scope of global modernisms. The second, third, and fourth sections survey the literature review, the transnational character of Maugham's writing, and his distinctive narrative style. The last section refers to the general organisation of the thesis.

## Conceptual Orientation

Before entering my discussion of Maugham, it is necessary to establish the stakes of the thesis by orienting this study in new modernist studies. The term ‘global modernism’ (plural: global modernisms) was cemented in literary criticism in 2012 with the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, as a result of various efforts to “destabilize what is meant by ‘modernism’” (Wollaeger 3). Traditionally, the modernist canon focuses on *avant-garde*, mostly white, masculine authors at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, constructing a Western-centric, elitist and male-dominated literary domain. The conceptualisation of a ‘global’ sense of plural ‘modernisms’ breaks through such stereotypes and invites scholarly examination of modernist voices from marginalised cultures and diverse communities.

The initial call for expanding modernist studies culminated in the establishment of the Modernist Studies Association in 1999, its annual conferences and groundbreaking journal *Modernism/Modernity*. These lively discussions brought forth Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s proposition of ‘New Modernist Studies’ (2008). They proposed three possible directions of expanding modernist studies: “temporal, spatial, and vertical” (Mao and Walkowitz 738), to consider those works produced outside the core period 1890-1945, beyond the exclusive regional focus of North America and Europe, and reaching further than a highly cultured elite readership, in relation to modernism.

The temporal and spatial dimensions of new modernist studies find parallel with the equally expanding, constantly “changeable” literary canon in world literature (Longxi Zhang “Canon” 121). The concept of world literature dated back to J. W. von Goethe’s ‘Conversations on World Literature’, where he is reported to have said, “[n]ational literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (23). Goethe’s ‘world literature’ is the sum of national literature. He believes “poetry is the universal possession of mankind” and

encourages readers to “look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us” (23).

Contemporary scholars conceptualise world literature as ‘literature being read in the world’.

David Damrosch attaches importance to the ‘circulation’ of literature. He considers world literature as “a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike” (5). Damrosch’s reading mode considers different cultural traditions in regions including Asia and Africa: “These works [...] stem from widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference, and poetics” (4). In new modernist studies, circulation and re-interpretation of non-Western classics becomes one reading method to spatially expand modernism. Scholars such as Christopher Bush, Eric Hayot, and Zhaoming Qian have identified Chinese ideographs, literature and painting as fundamental aesthetic origins for key aspects of Western high modernism.<sup>4</sup>

Another approach to new modernist studies is to reconsider time and space outside Europe and North America. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel’s collection *Geomodernisms* (2005) takes “a locational approach to modernisms’ engagement with cultural and political discourses of global modernity” (3), unveiling modernist art from Asia, Africa, India, South America, as well as in the townships<sup>5</sup> of Dublin and Native American communities in the United States. Doyle’s own essay in *Geomodernisms* traces ‘Atlantic modernity’ back to the 1640s. Susan Stanford Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms* (2015) reaches back and across to pre-1500 Asia to rethink modernity in Tang and Song China. “Modernity,” she writes, “takes various forms—thus, the *plural*; it happens again and again—thus, *recurrence*; it is constituted through many interconnected centers—thus, *global, relational*” (Friedman 4,

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<sup>4</sup> See Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*. Oxford University Press, 2010. Zhaoming Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens*. University of Virginia Press, 2003. Eric R. J Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, Tel Quel*. University of Michigan Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Locally administrated areas.

italic original). Modernism, as an artistic response to modernity, is unfolded as multiple global phenomena through interconnected centres in a planetary scale of time and space.

New modernist studies' emphasis on interconnectedness between different locations finds alternative approaches to colonial history rather than intensifying the binary of periphery/centre. Some critics speak of postcolonial literature as a form of modernist literature (Mao and Walkowitz 740), seeing modernism as a response to the colonial system. Unlike Said's critique of *A Passage to India* for it "made one see Indian politics as the charge of the British" (248) and Chinua Achebe's critique of *Heart of Darkness* for its dehumanising a portion of human race, Fredric Jameson argues that imperialism can be detected in modernism and is indeed constitutive of modernism ("Modernism and Imperialism" 64). Jameson examines extensively E. M. Forster's "modernist style" in *Howards End* ("Modernism and Imperialism" 54) and other modernist representations rooted in imperialism. Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby's *Modernism and Empire* (2000) continues the work of Jameson's groundbreaking essay to present the formative importance of British colonialism to modernism. The book, through a wide range of geomodernist locations – Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, India, Ceylon, and Kenya – recovers important socio-political structures behind modernist style to make modernism 'global' and less Eurocentric. These locational approaches to colonialism in new modernist studies reinvigorate the historically marginalised areas as indispensable centres of modernism.

Based on these orientations, my thesis defines 'East' and 'West' in a geographical and socio-political sense in response to geomodernism. It problematises the postcolonial binary of centre/periphery by disorienting history, in a manner similar to Dipesh Chakrabarty's "provincializing Europe" (2000) and John M. Hobson's "Eastern origins of Western civilization" (2004). My Chapter One reconsiders history, proposing 'interlinked East and West' as the conceptual foundation of Maugham's modernism. This thesis emphasises geomodernist localities rather than the colonial hierarchy between East and

West. I roughly designate ‘the West’ as West Europe, North and Middle America, including England, Germany, France, the United States, and the Caribbean; ‘the East’ as Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand hold special statuses on this list because of their colonial history and geographical distance from conventional modernist centres in Europe and North America. This geographical East–West distinction is indicated by the major locations of Maugham’s transnational travels, visualised in my world map at the beginning of the thesis. The temporal dimension follows Maugham’s intellectual journey (roughly 1900–1945) in understanding Eastern schools of Daoist, Buddhist and Vedantic classics from two thousand years ago to explore the universal topic of human suffering.

This study takes a comparative approach to Eastern and Western culture with a focus on circulation and transmission. I do not seek to intensify the power relationship between colonial subjects and objects in Maugham’s historical setting. Instead, I view (colonial) histories as a part of a global modernity which has informed Maugham’s modernism. Maugham’s irony that colonisers suffer from their imperialist mentality subtly subverts the empire-builder narrative, allowing for my close examination of his intellectual dialogues with the East. This cross-cultural perspective is largely inspired by Asian scholars’ comparative studies that acknowledge both Eastern and Western cultural traditions, such as Longxi Zhang’s *The Tao and the Logos* (1994) and Zong-qi Cai’s *Configurations of Comparative Poetics* (2001). These two sources indicate that Asian scholars had developed more nuanced ways of dealing with global modernism before the West came to realise that Asian aesthetics are fundamental to Western cultures and the rise of modernism.

I borrow Susan Stanford Friedman’s relational definition of modernity, “the insistence upon the Now – the present and its future as resistance to the past” (33). Modernity does not necessarily reside in the post-Renaissance or post-industrialisation

West but happens in the perpetual 'Now'. Modernism, as the aesthetic dimension of modernity, resists the past. Maugham's modernism resists the colonial past of the British Empire and his personal past troubled by questions of suffering and identity. His formal innovation of blending fact and fiction defies the traditional demarcation of genre; his rich use of symbolism and allegory is as strong as his contemporary modernist writers.

Finally, in response to the 'vertical' orientation of the New Modernism, Maugham's works are often considered as popular and commercial. This sidelining stereotype hinders readers' understanding of his social critique and the philosophical depth of his works. Growing up in France and being homosexual, Maugham does not fully identify himself as an English gentleman. His early works criticise the idea of the gentleman and the logic of British imperialism. The subtle vein of his sometimes-androgynous characterisation also opens up the question of queer writing in modernism. Although I do not intend to deploy a queer lens in this study, these undercurrents challenge the stereotype and call for a re-examination of Maugham's modernism.

## Literature Review

The number of critical studies on W. Somerset Maugham is surprisingly small, and most of them were published in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Representative monographs include, chronologically: the Maugham bibliographer Klaus W. Jonas's *The World of Somerset Maugham: an Anthology* (1959), Richard A. Cordell's *Somerset Maugham: a Biographical and Critical Study* (1961), Laurence Brander's *Somerset Maugham: a Reader's Guide* (1963), Robert Calder's *W. Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom* (1972) and Anthony Curtis's *The Pattern of Maugham* (1974). Major reviews by Maugham's contemporaries (such as W. H. Auden, D. H. Lawrence, Theodore Dreiser, Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield) were later compiled into *W. Somerset Maugham: The Critical Heritage* (1987) edited by Anthony Curtis and John Whitehead.

Among these critical works, few scholars paid special attention to Maugham's writing about the 'East'. Jonas's 'Somerset Maugham and the East' in his anthology is the earliest essay on Maugham's East. At the beginning of the essay, in the 'autobiographical elements' section, Jonas points out that Maugham's East symbolises freedom from the bleak human condition: "For Maugham the East becomes more and more a liberation, just as in his youth the loss of his religious belief and the awareness of the meaninglessness in life had given his freedom" (103). He then discusses Maugham's representations of degenerated Europeans in the climate of colonies. The final section on mixed race characters is controversial. Jonas notes that Maugham's East and West cannot truly merge: "there is an inevitable gap between white and coloured which cannot be bridged by a mixture of races but, on the contrary, becomes only more prominent" (141). This observation makes Maugham vulnerable to postcolonial critique as his Eurasian characters are often portrayed as tragic figures. Jonas's logic is subject to a strawman fallacy: it is not Maugham's Eastern environment that leads to tragedies, but, as my Chapter Two will demonstrate, it is rather provincial Eurocentric thinking that leads to tragic outcomes.

It was only in the 1990s that critical literature on Maugham and the East began to grow significantly – most likely a result of the surge in postcolonial theory the late 1970s and 1980s. Scholars began to recognise Maugham's 'East' as a colonial site. Two PhD theses emerged during this period: Mamta Chaudhary's *W. Somerset Maugham and the East: A Postcolonial Reading of the Implications of History, Culture and Text in the Work of a 'Popular' Writer* (1995) consolidates Maugham's writings as colonial discourse by drawing on local colonial histories (particularly those from the Subaltern Studies group of Indian historians); and Philip Holden's *Colonizing Masculinity: The Creation of a Male British Subjectivity in the Oriental Fiction of W. Somerset Maugham* (1994) draws from the intersection of postcolonial and gender studies, intervening Said's binary framework with Sedgwick's gender dimension to destabilise 'British male subjectivity' frequently portrayed in Maugham's works. Holden

uses homosexuality “as a lever to explore the connections between British constructions of masculinity and imaginative geography in the early twentieth century” (“Colonizing Masculinity” 6). In addition, Xingbo Li devotes the first chapter of his PhD thesis, *Images of China in Twentieth Century Colonial Discourse* (1995), to examining Maugham’s colonial construction of China as the ‘Other’, alongside writers such as André Malraux, Pearl Buck, and Bertolt Brecht.

These theses sparked a lively debate over the extent to which Maugham can be considered a ‘colonial’ writer, challenging the earlier humanist-writer paradigm in Maugham criticism. The early twenty-first century has witnessed a renewed wave of postcolonial readings, particularly within area studies. Two Hong Kong-based<sup>6</sup> scholars, Eddie Tay and Isaac Yue, have explored the anti-colonial dimensions of Maugham’s representations of the East<sup>7</sup> – Tay focusing on colonial Malaya, and Yue on China. Tay’s *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation* (2010) examines identity anxiety in colonial and postcolonial literatures of Singapore and Malaysia. He juxtaposes Maugham and Anthony Burgess to argue for the two authors’ depiction of the exhaustion of colonial romance in British Malaya. Tay’s claim that Maugham’s colonisers become victims to imperialism and his method of reading through belatedness will be considered in Chapter Two. However, Tay’s discussion is limited to Maugham’s Malay short stories and serves primarily to support his broader exploration of ‘home’ in Singaporean and Malaysian literature. Isaac Yue’s article, ‘W. Somerset Maugham and the Politicisation of the Chinese Landscape’ (2013), begins with a Saidian Orientalist framework, reviewing Chinese scholarship that largely categorises Maugham as a colonialist writer. Yue then shifts to a landscape reading,

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<sup>6</sup> Maugham’s novel *The Painted Veil* (1925) has been included within the scope of ‘colonial fiction’ in anglophone Hong Kong literature, alongside Richard Mason’s *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) and James Clavell’s *Tai-Pan* (1966). See Andrew J. Moody, “English-Language Literature of Hong Kong.” *The Oxford Handbook of Southeast Asian Englishes*, Oxford University Press, 2024.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast with the earlier focus on racial stereotypes in Maugham’s Eastern fiction. See Mimi Chan, “Women in Hong Kong Fiction Written in English: The Mixed Liaison.” *Renditions*, nos. 29 & 30 (Spring & Autumn 1988) 1988, pp. 257–74, [https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/rct/pdf/e\\_outputs/b2930/v29&30P257.pdf](https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/rct/pdf/e_outputs/b2930/v29&30P257.pdf).

uncovering the ambiguity in Maugham's imperialist outlook. He critiques the limitations of Orientalist frameworks and calls for more diverse approaches, particularly attention to the interplay between characters and local landscapes (Yue 80). Yue's work highlights the inadequacy of traditional Orientalist models in capturing the complexity of Maugham's engagement with the East.

A greater scholarly willingness to recognise Maugham's closeted homosexuality has opened avenues for queer readings.<sup>8</sup> Mark Clement's 'Queer Colonial Journeys: Alfred Russel Wallace and Somerset Maugham in the Malay Archipelago' (2017) argues that Maugham read Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* through a lens of homosexual desire, which significantly influenced Maugham's *The Narrow Corner* (1932) and two short stories, 'The Yellow Streak' and 'Neil MacAdam' (165). Philip Holden's 'A Life as a Work of Art: W. Somerset Maugham's Intimate Publics' (2011) extends his earlier work on homosexuality to explore Maugham's autobiographical persona in both fictional and non-fictional texts. He argues that Maugham constructs an intimate public persona that raises questions about authenticity and self-representation. However, Holden contends that Maugham "was not a modernist in the sense of our contemporary understanding of the modernist movement" as he "frequently defended a traditional realist emphasis on narrative closure" ("Intimate Publics" 976). Chapter Three will take *The Moon and Sixpence* as an example of a modernist novel situated in Post-Impressionist art and unreliable narrative.

Interdisciplinary research, particularly historical-literary research, has recently emerged in Maugham studies. Maugham's intentional narrative strategy of blending fact and fiction has complicated attempts to equate his fictional world with historical reality.

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<sup>8</sup> From a footnote in Winnie Chan's article, Leo Ou-fan Lee pointed out in an in-person meeting in 2020 that Maugham's gay identity and his travel experiences with a male partner had significant influence on the content of his created works, which inspired Chan's reading of *The Sacred Flame* as a subtle gay/queer text. See Hiu Ting Winnie Chan, "The Cross-Cultural Translation of Maugham's British Play in Hong Kong in the 1950s." *Comparative Literature & World Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, <http://www.cwliterature.org/uploadfile/2021/0419/20210419025521389.pdf>.

Two scholars are noteworthy here: 1) Laurence Wright finds realistic allusions in *The Moon and Sixpence* including Gauguin's paintings, contexts of the publishing world in London and the narrator's autobiographical references; 2) Chunmei Du, a historian specialising in Gu Hongming, identifies Gu as the Chinese philosopher that appears in Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen* and *East of Suez*. These studies draw on valuable historical resources in specific Maugham texts, providing groundwork for a wider discussion of Maugham's narrative strategies and philosophical engagement with the East.

The twenty-first century saw the publication of two major Maugham biographies: *Somerset Maugham: A Life* (2004) by Jeffrey Meyers and *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (2009) by Selina Hastings. Meyers, also biographer of George Orwell and Joseph Conrad among other literary figures, offers a critical literary perspective, while Hastings provides a more intimate portrait of Maugham's personal life. More recently, Tan Twan Eng's novel *The House of Doors* (2023) – longlisted for the Booker Prize – features Maugham and Gerald Haxton as central characters. Set in 1921 on a Malay island, the novel is narrated by Lesley, a woman who shares a story of love and betrayal that Maugham later transforms into *The Letter*. Lesley's narrative also incorporates historical references in her affair with Sun Wen (Sun Yat-sen) in Penang in 1910, before Sun initiated the 1911 Revolution, which ended the imperial government in China, and founded the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912.

Having reviewed diverse strands of recent Maugham scholarship, this section demonstrates that existing methodologies, such as postcolonial, queer, and historical approaches, partially grasp Maugham's active engagement with Eastern histories and cultures. Maugham's East requires comprehensive critical attention as it transformed his understanding of the world and human life and formulated his literary modernism.

## **Transnational Maugham**

Considering the detailed map and chronology set up at the beginning of the thesis, this section does not aim to present the full picture of Maugham's transnational life. It is important biographical context, though, to briefly introduce the major Eastern locations central to his works. Maugham's early transnational experiences enable him to view British society and imperialism critically and prepares him for his search for freedom in the East.

In the first ten years of his life, W. Somerset Maugham lived in Paris with his father, Robert Ormond Maugham, a solicitor to the British Embassy in Paris, and his mother Edith Mary Maugham (*SU* 15–16). French was Maugham's first language. His mother died of tuberculosis in 1882, and his father died of cancer two years later. In 1884, the ten-year-old orphan was sent to live with his uncle, Reverend Henry Macdonald Maugham, a stern and dull vicar in the seaside town Whitstable, Kent – later fictionalised as 'Blackstable' in his works. The household, which included the vicar's German wife Sophia, was childless and emotionally distant, offering little more than religious instruction.

In 1885 Maugham entered the junior annexe of the King's School in Canterbury, an ancient school where the sons of gentlemen were educated in classics and sports (Cordell 26). He struggled to fit in, was mocked for his poor English, and developed a stammer. This experience is of "utter desolation" (Hastings 19), described in his autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage* (1915) with emotional precision, particularly the chapters centred upon the King's School. Maugham later remarked: "I had put pretty well all my experiences into *Of Human Bondage* and I did not know how I was to follow that up" (Jonas 97), suggesting that he had exhausted his Western material and turned to the East for new material.

In 1890, at the age of sixteen, Maugham left the King's School and spent a year in Germany, studying literature and philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, though he did not matriculate (Cordell 29). This one-year sojourn broadened his intellectual horizons. That winter, he attended Kuno Fischer's lectures on Schopenhauer, sparking a lifelong interest in philosophy (*SU* 232–33). His friend John Ellingham Brooks – possibly his first

male partner and the model for Hayward in *Of Human Bondage* – introduced him to the works of Oscar Wilde, Cardinal Newman, Matthew Arnold, and the modern theatre of Ibsen, Becque, and Sudermann (Meyers *SMAL* 47). They also travelled together through Belgium and the Netherlands.

Returning to England in 1891, Maugham enrolled at St Thomas' Medical School in Lambeth, London. His medical training made him “a student of raw human nature” (Meyers *SMAL* 58), cultivating the clinical detachment that would characterise his literary style. Near the completion of his medical degree, his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth* (1897), received critical acclaim when he was twenty-three.

Maugham had ambivalent feelings toward England, viewing it as both home and a source of burdensome obligations. In his memoir *The Summing Up* (1938), he wrote:

I am attached to England, but I have never felt myself very much at home there. I have always been shy with English people. To me England has been a country where I had obligations that I did not want to fulfil and responsibilities that irked me. I have never felt entirely myself till I had put at least the Channel between my native country and me. Some fortunate persons find freedom in their own minds, I, with less spiritual power than they, find it in travel. (*SU* 95)

This sense of unhomeliness – a feeling of alienation from English society – was a driving force behind Maugham's travels. In his early novels, characters often express a yearning to escape to the East. For example, Dr Frank Hurrell in *The Merry-Go-Round* (1904) says:

My whole soul aches for the East, for Egypt and India and Japan; I want to know the corrupt, eager life of the Malays and the violent adventures of South Sea Islands. I may not get an answer to the riddle of life in the open world, but I shall get nearer to it than here; I can get nothing more out of books and civilization. (*MGR* 249)

Similarly, Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage* yearns for the East:

As soon as I've got through my hospital appointments I shall get a ship; I want to go to the East – the Malay Archipelago, Siam, China, and all that sort of thing – and then I shall take odd jobs. Something always comes along – cholera duty in India and things like that. I want to go from place to place. I want to see the world. The only way a poor man can do that is by going in for the medical. (*HB* 342)

Both characters, like Maugham himself, grow up in fictionalised versions of Whitstable and pursue medical training. Their longing for the East reflects a deeper desire to escape the constraints of their upbringing and to seek meaning in the wider world – what Jonas calls “a way toward the understanding of the meaning of life” (98).

Maugham did not seek comfort or relaxation in travel; rather, he sought transformation. As he wrote in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930):

I am often tired of myself, and I have a notion that by travel I can add to my personality and so change myself a little. I do not bring back from a journey quite the same self that I took. (*GP* 13)

His lifelong companion, Gerald Haxton, accompanied him on nearly all his travels – to the South Seas, Malaya, Borneo, Japan, Australia, India, and China. Haxton's remarkable social ease helped the more reserved Maugham connect with a wide range of people in ships, clubs, barrooms, and hotels. Many of the notes Maugham took during these travels, later collected and published as *A Writer's Notebook* (1949), became the basis for his fiction.

The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 and his subsequent imprisonment “cast a shadow over Maugham's life” (Meyers *SMAL* 87). In England, homosexuality was criminalised under the 1885 Labouchère Amendment, punishable by a minimum of ten years' penal servitude. In contrast, France and other parts in continental Europe were more tolerant. This oppressive legal and social climate contributed to what Maugham described as one of

his 'obligations' in England: the need to maintain a masculine heteronormative persona. He lived in fear of Wilde's fate and never publicly acknowledged Haxton in his published works. Haxton only appears in Maugham's private correspondence, much of which he wished to destroy after his death. These letters preserve Maugham's delicate emotions behind his cold persona.

In a letter to Christopher Isherwood dated 23 August 1944, Maugham expressed his grief over Haxton's impending death, quoting the Indian idea of 'non-attachment':

Twenty-five of the best years of my life are inextricably connected with him. I am too old to have Gerald die before me. I have not acquainted the state of non-attachment of your Swami's + though my reason tells me that I shall get over his death if he dies, I cannot bear with my heart to look forward to the emptiness of life without him. ("Letters to Isherwood")

Maugham and Haxton's journey to India in 1938 provides philosophical material for Maugham's fiction and reflections on his own life. Maugham was more interested in Indian philosophy than tourist attractions. He visited Swami Ramana Maharishi to discuss Vedanta, later recounting this visit in his philosophical essay 'The Saint'. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 prevented Maugham's plan for a second visit. During the War, Maugham lived in the United States (1939–1946), where he wrote *The Razor's Edge* (1944), a novel that integrates Vedantic philosophy into the post-war American psyche, critiquing materialism and providing a philosophical path to spiritual liberation.

### **Narrative Strategies**

To demonstrate Maugham's modernist literary techniques, this section selects and defines the following seven terms that characterise his narrative strategies. These terms will recur throughout the thesis and are essential for discussing Maugham's literary views

and experimentation. While some are familiar in literary studies, it is necessary to clarify them here to establish the framework of Maugham's stylistic approach.

This framework aims to disrupt simplistic classifications of Maugham as a strictly realist, 'popular,' or 'pre-modernist' writer.

### 1. Simplicity

Maugham regarded simplicity as the highest virtue in writing. In *The Summing Up*, he wrote that the essence of good prose was "simplicity, lucidity and euphony" (30), ranking in an order of importance. This emphasis on simple clarity sets him apart from high modernists like Joyce, Woolf, Pound, and Eliot. Jeffrey Meyers adopts Maugham's formula in his own assessment of Maugham's style: "In contrast to the stylistic and technical innovations of the modernists [...] Maugham believed and was fond of repeating that the essence of good prose was simplicity, lucidity and euphony" (*SMAL* 143).

Maugham opposed the use of stream-of-consciousness as a foundational narrative technique, arguing that it compromised lucidity. However, he acknowledged its occasional effectiveness:

Of the other experiments that have been made the most important is the use of the stream of thought. [...] When writers, instead of using it as an occasional device for a particular purpose, ironical, dramatic or explanatory, made it the basis of their work it proved tedious. (*SU* 213–14)

Maugham's emphasis on clarity aligns him with writers like George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway, who, while not necessarily *avant-garde*, responded stylistically to the human condition in the modern world. Maugham's emphasis on simplicity has a strong influence on Orwell's 'windowpane' style in his social critique, which will be examined in Chapter Two.

### 2. Autobiographical first-person narrator and intertextuality

Maugham frequently employs an 'autobiographical first-person narrator', often sharing identifiable biographical traits with the author himself. This persona appears as

Willie Ashenden in *Cakes and Ale* and several short stories (e.g., ‘The Alien Corn’, ‘The Book Bag’), as the unnamed biographer narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and explicitly as ‘Mr Somerset Maugham’ in *The Razor’s Edge*. This marks a shift from the third-person narrative of *Of Human Bondage* (1915) to a mode of meta-narrative after *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919).

As Philip Holden observes, “Maugham’s new fiction left omniscience behind, adopting a narrational strategy that allowed the intratextual creation of an autobiographical persona who then take on an extratextual life” (“Intimate Publics” 975). This persona is so carefully constructed that readers often conflate the narrator with the real author. Holden further argues that Maugham’s non-fiction – *On a Chinese Screen*, *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, and *The Summing Up* – is “elaborately fictional” in its complete omission of Gerald Haxton (“Intimate Publics” 976).

Maugham’s *oeuvre* is self-referential. Characters and events refer to each other across texts: Miss Ley from *Mrs Craddock* reappears in *The Merry-Go-Round*; *Of Human Bondage* references a stockbroker who abandons his family to paint in Tahiti – alluding to Strickland in *The Moon and Sixpence*; *The Razor’s Edge* opens with the narrator’s statement that “Many years ago I wrote a novel called *The Moon and Sixpence*” (RE 1); and the two main characters in *The Narrow Corner* continue from *On a Chinese Screen* and *The Moon and Sixpence*. This intertextuality reinforces a unified fictional world and blurs the boundary between fiction and reality.

### **3. External approach**

I propose the term ‘external approach’ to describe Maugham’s first-person narrative of portraying characters from a reporter-like distance, where the narrator does not access the character’s inner thoughts. This is evident in *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Razor’s Edge*, where the narrator attempts to understand the protagonist’s motives but remains outside their consciousness. This technique is reminiscent of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*

and Mr Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights* – narrators who reconstruct stories through observation and second-hand accounts. Maugham’s narrators are limited in perspective, but the ‘autobiographical’ nature makes their accounts credible.

Maugham believed this external stance made for more believable storytelling. In *Ten Novels and Their Authors*, he critiques the internal first-person narrative of *David Copperfield* for not being convincing: “I cannot persuade myself that in the end he became the successful novelist we are told he did” (150). He also critiques the omniscient narrative:

The method makes demands on the author which he cannot always meet. He has to get into the skin of every one of his characters, feel his feelings, think his thoughts; but he has his limitations and he can only do this when there is in himself something of the character he has created. When there’s isn’t, he can only see him from the outside, and then the character lacks the persuasiveness which causes the reader to believe in him. (*TNTA* 8–9)

In contrast, he praises Melville’s narrator in *Moby Dick*:

The author tells the story himself, but he is not the hero and it is not his story that he tells. He is a character in it, and is more or less closely connected with the persons who take part in it. His role is not to determine the action, but to be the confidant, the mediator, the observer of those who do take part in it. (*TNTA* 11)

This observer–narrator, closely connected to but not central to the action, evolves into Maugham’s autobiographical persona, which recurs across his fiction. The use of external autobiographical narrator is one of Maugham’s most significant literary experiments.

#### 4. **Free indirect discourse**

This technique allows Maugham’s third-person narratives to access and present a character’s inner thoughts. It is used in two cases: 1) adding philosophical depth to the character, for example, Philip Carey’s musing on the meaning of life in *Of Human Bondage*

and Dr Saunders's Buddhist thought over the sea in *The Narrow Corner*; 2) creating irony, for example, 'The Taipan' reveals the British coloniser's deepest fear of dying far away from home behind his pretentious appearance as a successful businessman in Hong Kong.

### 5. Humour and irony

Maugham's first-person autobiographical narrator has a humorous voice, creating effects of irony. For example, the first section of Chapter Six in *The Razor's Edge* presents the following invitation to the reader:

I feel it right to warn the reader that he can very well skip this chapter without losing the thread of such story as I have to tell, since for the most part of it nothing more than the account that I had with Larry. I should add, however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worthwhile to write this book. (*RE* 242)

A reader focused only on plot may skip this chapter, as the narrator suggests – thus missing the philosophical core of the novel. The irony lies in the narrator's humorous and self-effacing 'warning', understating this chapter's importance to the novel and its profound philosophical meaning. The autobiographical narrator is playing with narrative reliability.

### 6. Symbolism and allegory

Maugham's symbolism conveys his philosophical exploration of constraint and freedom. One often-used symbol is the 'caged bird' representing the deprivation of freedom. It appears in the opening scene of *On a Chinese Screen* and more notably in the allegory 'Princess September' in *The Gentleman in the Parlour*: the bird stops singing when being caged, suggesting that freedom is essential for artistic creativity.

In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip Carey's suffering is symbolised by his club foot, and his suffering is allegorised through the tale of the Eastern King (the Persian Prince Zémire). The novel's most powerful symbol – the Persian carpet – representing contingency and the subjective meaning of human life will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

## 7. Genre

Maugham's works challenge fixed genre boundaries. 'The Taipan' first appeared in *On a Chinese Screen* as non-fiction but was later included in his short story collections. 'Princess September' was published separately as an illustrated allegory. The opening chapter of *The Moon and Sixpence* was presented in a format similar to biography with footnotes and fictional references. Some of Maugham's travel notes in China and India were incorporated verbatim into his play *East of Suez* and essay 'The Saint'. *A Writer's Notebook* does not belong to any strict non-fictional genre of memoir, journal or travelogue.

### Chapter Outline

My study builds up a threefold methodology to re-envisage the complex and interconnected relationship between East and West in Maugham's writing, in counterpoint to more familiar postcolonial binaries. My first chapter proposes this methodology: 'East as Other', 'East as Reference', and 'East as Method'. Drawing on history and literary criticism, I trace the origins of my modernist framework as far back as the first century when the Roman Empire established commercial and cultural exchange with Han China. The larger part of this chapter surveys literary representation of the East in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, roughly coinciding with Maugham's writing career. I do not aim to draw a full picture of the Eastern images in Western writing, but to uncover the recurring patterns throughout history to build a context for my reconsideration of the East–West relationship as it has been understood.

'East as Other' investigates the double othering process of the East, taking China as the main example. On the one hand, in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, popular British and American literature and films imagine China as a mysterious and potentially threatening country (e.g., the Yellow Peril, the Fu Manchu series and Limehouse literature). On the other hand, radical Chinese intellectuals in the May Fourth

Movement sought modernisation by borrowing Western knowledge to reform Chinese educational and political systems. This pattern is categorised by the cultural distance between East and West. Under the Western stereotype of othering China, some Chinese intellectuals othered their own culture by radically learning from the West while dismissing traditional Chinese values. 'East as Reference' proposes a cross-cultural model that Western writers view the East as a psychological, theological, or intellectual counterpart to their own culture with resources to be absorbed. Starting from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers' reference to China, this model selects seven authors, Franz Kafka, E. M. Forster, André Malraux, Hermann Hesse, Pearl Buck, W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood, most of whom spent some time in East and South Asia and had a certain level of understanding of Eastern cultures, yet their Eastern fiction is referential to the Western thinking mode and finds parallels with their previous works. My final model, 'East as Method' traces some of the Chinese origins of Western Romanticism and considers the East as a heterogenous force that can reshape Western thinking. This is evident in the re-invention and re-interpretation of Chinese characters in the rise of high modernism, represented by Ezra Pound, Ernest Fenollosa, and Victor Segalen. I conclude this chapter with a vision 'East as Modernist Method', envisaging the East as an equally significant component as the West that comprises global modernism.

Chapter Two examines Maugham's critique of English conventions in both England and in Eastern colonies. This chapter starts with Friedman's conceptualisation of global modernity to put Maugham's Eastern locations in a modernist framework. The first section compares the first half of *Of Human Bondage* and its earlier draft 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey' (1897-98), arguing that both the novel and Maugham's unpublished manuscript contain social critiques of the English class system and suggest a transnational quest for freedom. The section also draws thematic comparison of Maugham's Paris scenes depicting artistic gatherings with those by James Joyce, Ford Madox Ford, and Ernest

Hemingway who were in Paris around or after Maugham's time. The second section begins by drawing out three limitations from existing postcolonial studies on Maugham's East. Then, it moves to examine Maugham's representation of Eastern characters and environments in China, Malaya, Borneo, and Burma, revealing that Maugham's depiction of the East is inherently bright and full of vitality, but the arrival of European colonisers brings darkness and misery. This section features a comparative reading of Maugham's short stories and the opening chapters of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, comparing their modernist techniques, such as symbolism and delayed decoding, and their effects on the authors' criticism of the colonial system. The final section borrows community theories from Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy to analyse the expatriate officer communities in British Malaya and Borneo, unveiling their loneliness and suffering behind the imperialist narrative of British history. Maugham critiques colonial violence in a humorous and ironic voice of a future historian and with a logic similar to that arising in his conversation with a Chinese philosopher. This chapter concludes with a brief study of Maugham's seldom noticed but strong influence on George Orwell in style and subject matter in both fiction and non-fiction.

Chapter Three enters the realm of painting and comparative poetics between Chinese and English literature. It starts with a comparison of Impressionist painting and Daoism in their effect of aesthetic suggestion, which has the potential to overcome the limits of language. The first major section analyses *The Moon and Sixpence* as an 'Post-Impressionist' novel with rich references to Paul Gauguin's paintings, the autobiographical first-person narrator's unreliable manipulation of the text, and his 'external', fragmented, collage-like portrait of the main character. Tahiti provides the inarticulate fictional artist with both artistic material and spiritual freedom, leading to the realisation of his artistic self. The second section examines several Maugham's vignettes written in China, which incorporate Maugham's knowledge of Chinese poetry, painting, architecture, and

philosophy, and his in-person contact with Chinese art. These Chinese art forms connote 'suggestion' as the main aesthetic and philosophical principle which comes from Daoism. The final section turns to *The Painted Veil*, a novel set in China, analysing how Maugham's 'Impressionist' representation of Chinese landscape translates into the Daoist philosophy as the core of the novel, and how Daoist understanding transforms the heroine by providing a path between 'there is' and 'there is not'.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter Four assumes a philosophical lens, exploring the connotation of Schopenhauer's philosophy in the second half of *Of Human Bondage*, Buddhism in *The Narrow Corner*, and Advaita Vedanta in *The Razor's Edge*. This chapter is based on a solid archival methodology, citing Maugham's manuscripts, letters, and his notes on Indian philosophical books from archival materials housed in the Library of Congress, the National Library of Australia, the Huntington Library, the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, and the Maugham Library at the King's School, Canterbury. Based on close reading of these novels and archival material, I argue that these three philosophical novels reflect Maugham's exploration of ways of liberating from suffering. Maugham's deep resonance with Schopenhauer, whose philosophy absorbs significant Indian philosophy, prepares for his later intellectual journey to India. Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta both begin with similar propositions such as the illusionary nature of the world, karma, and the cycle of death and rebirth, but differ in each school's understanding of essence of the world and the path to liberation. *The Narrow Corner* reveals that reality is empty; only through resignation to this truth can one attain freedom. *The Razor's Edge*, steeped in Shankara's Vedantic philosophy, suggests transcendental knowledge leads one to realise the truth that his self, Atman, is the same as the ultimate reality, Brahman.

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<sup>9</sup> 'There is', 有 (you), also translated as Being/Presence; 'there is not', 無 (wu), also translated as Non-Being/Absence.

The first two chapters of my thesis reconsider history, the literary canon, social and cultural contexts, and modernist senses of time and space. The following two chapters focus on specific Eastern locations, China and India, to delineate the non-Western material at the core of Maugham's narrative. All chapters employ a comparative approach with equal attention to both Eastern and Western traditions. Combining a historical approach, archival methodology, and close reading of primary texts, altogether the four chapters of this thesis intervene in both Maugham and modernist studies, contending that the East is generative of Maugham's modernist method.

This thesis is the first comprehensive study dedicated to Maugham and modernist studies,<sup>10</sup> with the aim to remediate the sidelining tendencies of Maugham's work and make a contribution to East–West aesthetics and comparative literature and philosophy.

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<sup>10</sup> Some journal articles explore Maugham's modernist aesthetic of a limited range of texts, such as *The Moon and Sixpence*. See Darren J. Borg, "W. Somerset Maugham, Henry James, and the Modernist Aesthetic of the Moon and Sixpence." *CEA critic*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2022, pp. 13–28, doi:10.1353/cea.2022.0001.

## Chapter One

### History and Methodology: Three Ways of Looking at the East

“A new age is being created in this wedding of East and West.”

I. A. Richards, “The Chinese Renaissance,” 1932

“What a strange idea is this that change must always be progress! Europeans complain that Chinese workmen use the same implements as they have used for centuries; but it [*sic*] with these rude tools they have been able to work with a delicacy and a sureness unsurpassable by Western artificers, why on earth should they change?”

W. Somerset Maugham, *A Writer's Notebook*, 1900

#### Introduction: Interlinked East and West

This chapter examines certain aspects of East–West connections through history, literature, and aesthetics, in the time leading up to and including modernism. I seek to position Maugham in the constellation of his contemporary writers, intervening postcolonial reading in existing Maugham studies with my outlook on history that the East is an inherent component of Western civilisation and modernism. This introductory section counters possible Eurocentric prejudice and simplistic dualistic methodology by drawing on John M. Hobson’s *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (2004), a book that has challenged the preconception that the West initiated modernity out of whole cloth and disseminated it to the world. I will develop the argument that the East had formed what might be recognised as elements of economic and industrial ‘modernity’ much earlier than the West, but a set of self-fashioned European narratives later marginalised the East and justified colonial ideology. Maugham’s Eastern writing during the colonial era debunks this Eurocentric logic and recovers the dimensions of Eastern knowledge and art in the development of modernity neglected by mainstream literature.

The major part of this chapter sets up my methodology of reading Maugham by proposing three patterns of Eastern writing in modern literature and contemporary reading by critics: East as Other, East as Reference, and East as Method, categorised by the distance between the writer and the world observed. This chapter does not provide an exhaustive overview of Eastern representations in Western literature, nor does it seek to engage in extensive close reading of key works. Instead, it explores the patterns of how the East is presented, understood, and becomes a part of modern Western culture. The East covered in my thesis primarily concerns Asia, specifically East, South, and Southeast Asia, through which Maugham extensively travelled from the 1910s to the 1930s. His understanding of the East and his depth of exploring the East evolved along with these travels.

This chapter is organised into three major sections, each outlining one of my reading methods. 'East as Other' takes China as an example, whereby the East is figured as alien, threatening, and enigmatic. This model, widely seen in popular twentieth-century English and American literature and Hollywood films adapted from these works, is prone to inaccuracy and prejudice. These narratives described China from distant imagination, oblivious to the intellectual and political modernisation processes at the time in China, known as the May Fourth Movement in 1919. On the other hand, the May Fourth Chinese intellectuals showed a tendency of self-othering by learning about modern technology and practical philosophy from the West and radically rejecting Confucianism. 'East as Reference' examines ways that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers and twentieth-century fiction writers refer to the East, China and India in particular, and use the resources of these civilisations to develop their own works: the East is still inscrutable and foreign to European consciousness but is seen as a repository of wisdom to be absorbed. Enlightenment philosophers such as Leibniz and Voltaire had never been to China but referred to China in terms of Confucian morality and governance, within the limits of the sources available to them, to develop their philosophy. Most fiction writers in my selection

had substantial knowledge of local customs after visiting or living in Eastern countries. However, their contact with the East is still limited as most writers only engage with one aspect of one Eastern country, and the East becomes symbolic for gnomic meanings beyond the representation of canonical Western literature. ‘East as Method’ investigates how Western writers absorbed Eastern aesthetics and developed it as the foundation of their own works. Examples include how the aesthetic tendencies of Chinoiserie and Japonisme impacted Romanticism and Modernism, informing fundamental cross-cultural innovations in poetry and poetics. The East then actively transformed Western aesthetics and literature. My methodology aims to exemplify dominating patterns underlying the long-lasting and complex dynamics between Asia and Western writers, among whom Maugham critically engaged with history and modernity. This chapter will conclude with a vision on modernism, which I call ‘East as Modernist Method’: the East is considered as a significant and inseparable component of Western literature and art, a method of developing modernism. The relationship between East and West is mutually inter-dependent and intellectually nurturing, altogether having significantly participated in the formation of Global Modernism. The threefold methodology I propose in this chapter will foreground my reading of Maugham’s Eastern writings in later chapters and inspire future studies on marginalised writers in a global landscape of modernism.

Before elaborating these three reading methods, I will first introduce Hobson’s idea of the ‘Oriental West’, then review the history of East–West connections, from the Silk Road trade between the Roman Empire and Han China to the transmission of Christianity in cosmopolitan Tang China, from Marco Polo’s travel accounts of the technologically advanced Song China to the Europeans’ self-fashioned imperialist narrative of colonial Southeast Asia, which still haunted Maugham’s times of writing. The self-generated Eurocentric myth of progress and modern technology has set the groundwork for the ‘East as Other’ stereotype that marginalised the East, but this chapter proposes alternative

approaches that feature intellectual and aesthetic connections between East and West. These approaches form my three patterns and are evident in Maugham's works. Like Matteo Ricci, Maugham had conversations with Chinese scholars; like Ezra Pound, Maugham appreciated Chinese poetry and painting; like Hermann Hesse and Christopher Isherwood, Maugham read Indian religion and philosophy. However, Maugham's engagement with the East is more diverse and multi-faceted: his travels all over Southeast Asia, China, and India have distinguished him from the 'East as Other' stereotype; his reflection on the European constraint of human nature inspires 'East as Reference'; and his contemplation on non-Western art and philosophy develops into his 'East as Method'.

East and West are essentially 'interlinked', using Hobson's words, from pre-modern times. This idea has challenged the Eurocentric discourse that viewed the East as an inferior counterpart in the foundation of 'East as Other' narratives. Hobson argues that "the East (which was more advanced than the West between 500 and 1800) provided a crucial role in enabling the rise of modern Western civilisation" (Hobson 2). His methodology is twofold: on the one hand, he restores the Eastern agency concealed in the European narrative of world history, and the East's active contribution to global economy since the fifth century and its advanced "resource portfolios" (technologies, institutions, ideas) delivered to the West. On the other hand, he traces the Europeans' active construction of Western agency, or collective identity, which emerged with imperialism in the fifteenth century and created a dominating story of European progress that marginalised the East. Therefore, Hobson replaces the idea of autonomous or pristine West with "Oriental West" (2-5), suggesting the East's significant contribution to Western modernity. Such a methodology dismantles the mythologised unique status of a self-generated European modernity and calls for sophisticated approaches to reconsidering a multi-faceted East-West relationship.

Historians have recorded the trade connections between the Roman Empire and Han China through the Silk Road, which reached its height in 90-130 A.D. (Thorley 71).

Encountering the obstruction of two lucrative-minded intermediate empires, the Parthian Empire and the Kushan Empire (Thorley 71), the Roman Empire turned to the Indian Ocean, developing “full commercial contact with India” (McLaughlin 29) after its conquest of Egypt in 31 B.C. Ptolemy’s *Geography* records that Roman traders reached Burma, Siam, Cambodia and Borneo, and a few decades later reached Vietnam and China through the maritime Silk Road (McLaughlin 58–59). The Han histories record that the Roman subjects reached the Chinese territory in 166 A.D., presenting gifts such as ivory, rhinoceros horn and tortoise shell to the Emperor Huan (McLaughlin 59).

In the seventh century, Christianity was brought from the Byzantine Empire to Tang China. The ‘Nestorian Monument’<sup>11</sup> in the Tang capital of Chang’an (near modern Xi’an) documents this religious blossoming in China and the historical event of the first named Syriac missionary Alopen, “with the encouragement of the Byzantine Emperor” (Lieu 561), being received by Emperor Taizong at the Court of Tang in 635. The monument was erected in 781 to memorialise the blossoming of Christianity in China and the career of a Sogdian priest and military officer, Mar Yazdbuzid, known in Chinese as Yisi. In the later stage of this religious transmission, Christian messages were integrated with Taoist and Buddhist expressions, becoming “closer to indigenous models” (Nicolini-Zani 128). The Tang Dynasty also witnessed the spread of Islam in China from 651, soon after its emergence, so the Christian texts on the Nestorian Monument also reflect the Byzantines’ anxious attempt to make a “potential military alliance” (Lieu 560) with the Tang and maintain Syriac Christianity after the Muslim Conquest of the Levant (S. Johnson 15).

The Song Dynasty saw the culmination of China’s “industrial miracle”, which occurred over a period of 1500 years, six hundred years before Britain entered its so-called

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<sup>11</sup> Or the ‘Nestorian Stele/Tablet’, literally ‘Stele on the Introduction of the Luminous Religion of *Daqin* to China’ (大秦景教流行中國碑). *Daqin* refers vaguely to the eastern Roman Empire; and ‘Luminous Religion’ refers to Christianity as propagated by the Nestorians. See Timothy Billings, “Untranslation Theory: The Nestorian Stele and the Jesuit Illustration of China.” *Sinographies: Writing China*, edited by Eric Hayot et al., 1st ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2008, pp. 89–114.

‘industrial revolution’ in the middle of the eighteenth century (Hobson 51). Hobson takes examples of Chinese innovation in iron/steel, textile, and transportation industries as well as the rise of a commercialised economy in the use of taxation, printing, paper-money making and large-scale publishing (51–56). Marco Polo’s *Travels* emphasised economic prosperity in China, as Jonathan Spence notices, including evidence such as “the use of coal for fuel”, “paper money”, “massed boats” and “price stabilization techniques” (23) observed by the Venetian merchant. Polo is said to have stayed in China during 1271–1295 in the Yuan Dynasty, soon after Song’s collapse and worked for Kublai Khan’s court. Although debate over its authenticity exists, due to Polo’s tendency for outright fabrication, exaggeration and omission, *Travels* remains broadly recognised as the first Western account of the East through an on-the-spot narration, with “astonishingly accurate” (Spence 20) records of some historical events.

However, the culturally diverse and technologically progressive Chinese history was marginalised as ‘peripheral’ in the Eurocentric ‘myth of 1492’. The myth that Columbus ‘discovered’ America at the pinnacle of European economic and military development was instead built on Europe’s assimilation or emulation of the superior resource portfolios pioneered by the East (Hobson 164). The four great inventions of China – gunpowder, the compass, papermaking, and printing – all appeared earlier than their European counterparts. As Hobson puts forward, it was very possible for European travellers or Jesuits to relay the formula for making gunpowder from China back to Europe (186–87). Ironically, Chinese people invented metal guns and cannon-equipped ships much earlier than Europe, but Europeans claimed these to be their unique innovations and used them to invade Eastern countries. This logical fallacy was revealed by a Chinese philosopher in his conversation with Maugham, assimilated in Maugham’s fictional character and non-fictional imperialist critique, as I will discuss in Chapter Two.

The European revision to world history justified the history of colonialism through the ‘discovery’ of Asia and Africa, while the peoples from the latter “had already long been in contact with Europe” (Hobson 140). From 1405 to 1433, the Chinese Islamic admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) sailed seven expeditions, traversing the Indian Ocean and landing on the east coast of Africa, not to mention reaching the Arabian Peninsula, India, and Southeast Asia. The triple-mast system that made Vasco da Gama’s voyage possible was introduced to European shipping only in the mid-fifteen century, most likely from China, where this technique was invented and had long been in use (Hobson 142). Da Gama’s three-mast ships were smaller than Zheng He’s nine- or ten- mast ships, and his “four ships and 170 men paled by comparison with the several hundred ships and 27,550 men of Chéng’s 1431/3 voyage” (Hobson 145). While disseminating Chinese culture and trade, along with Islamising Southeast Asia, Zheng He “did not occupy or colonize an inch of foreign land” (Dasheng Chen 168). This provides another irony that the Europeans learned Eastern technology but applied it to their voyages of violence, unfolding a five-century-long dark and brutal history of colonisation. Parts of India were conquered by the Portuguese in 1505, and Malacca in 1511, before the two rival merchant communities, the Dutch and British East India companies, sought to enter the spice trade directly on the Indian Archipelago (SarDesai 62). By the early twentieth century, all territories in Southeast Asia except Siam/Thailand (Figure 1) were colonised, until the emergence of wide-scale nationalist movements for independence later in the century.

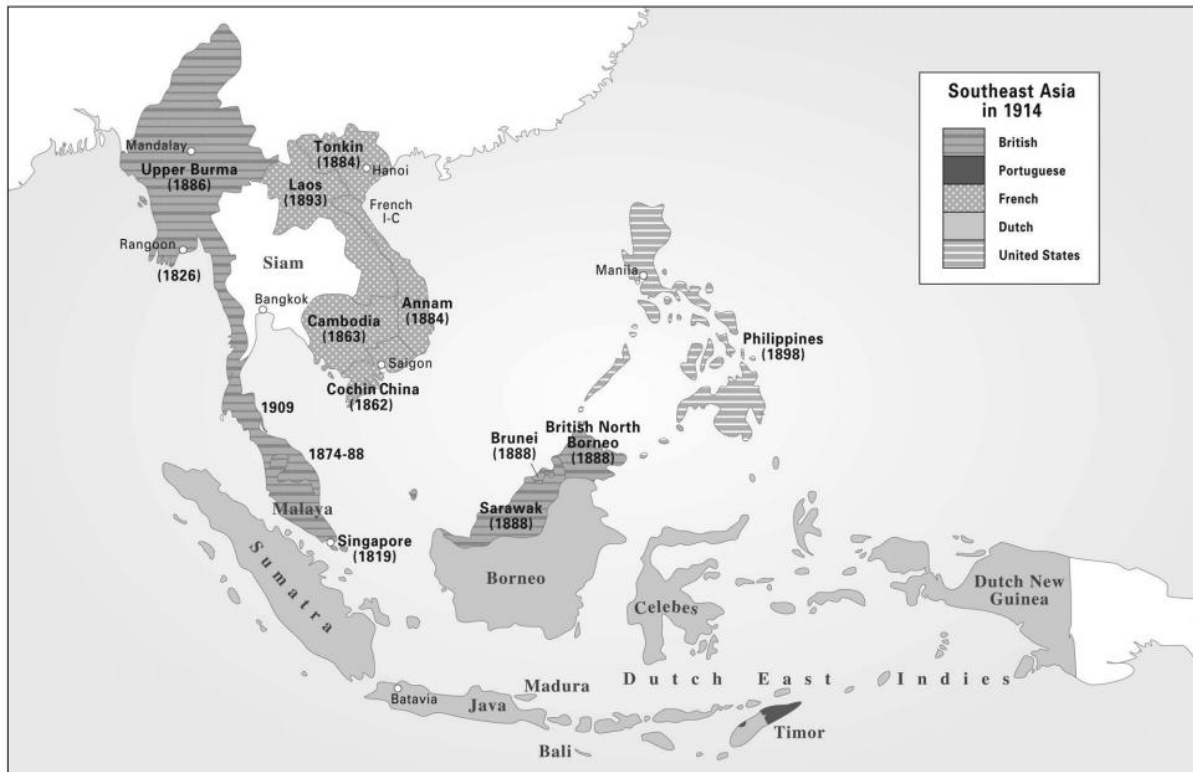


Figure 1. Southeast Asia in 1914<sup>12</sup>

I mention European colonial history in Asia because this contact underpinned Maugham's travelling and writing. At the height of his writing career, Maugham travelled five times to colonial Asia: three times to almost all the territories in Southeast Asia during the 1920s–30s, once to China in 1919–20 and once to India in 1936. These travels correspond to volumes of his fictional and non-fictional works. In 1959–60, Maugham revisited Singapore, Saigon, Manila, and Rangoon when he was 86 years old and no longer wrote stories.<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Maugham's Malaya in his stories consisted of three models of British government (Figure 2): 1) the Straits Settlements under British possession since 1826, including Penang, Singapore, Malacca, and Dindings; 2) the Federated Malay States (FMS), governed by the British resident-general, including the four

<sup>12</sup> Map from D. R. SarDesai. *Southeast Asia: Past and Present*. Second edition, Taylor & Francis, 2018, p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> Maugham's travel itineraries are archived in the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

states of Selangor, Sembilan, Perak, and Pahang; and 3) the five Unfederated Malay States (UMS) of Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis, where sultans retained more control over domestic affairs than their counterparts in FMS and the British advisers had less authority than British residents (Hooker 136–37). Leaving the independent Republic of Singapore aside, what was then British Malaya is known today as West Malaysia or Peninsular Malaysia (Figure 3), while East Malaysia comprises Sarawak, Sabah, and the Labuan islands. Sabah was renamed ‘British North Borneo’ from 1881 by a chartered company and was granted protectorate status under the British government in 1888, together with Sarawak and Brunei (Hooker 283). Sabah, along with Sarawak, became British colonies from 1946 to 1963 when the Federation of Malaysia was founded and Sabah returned to its old name. The Sultanate of Brunei remained a British protectorate until it achieved independence in 1984; Singapore quit the Federation in 1965.

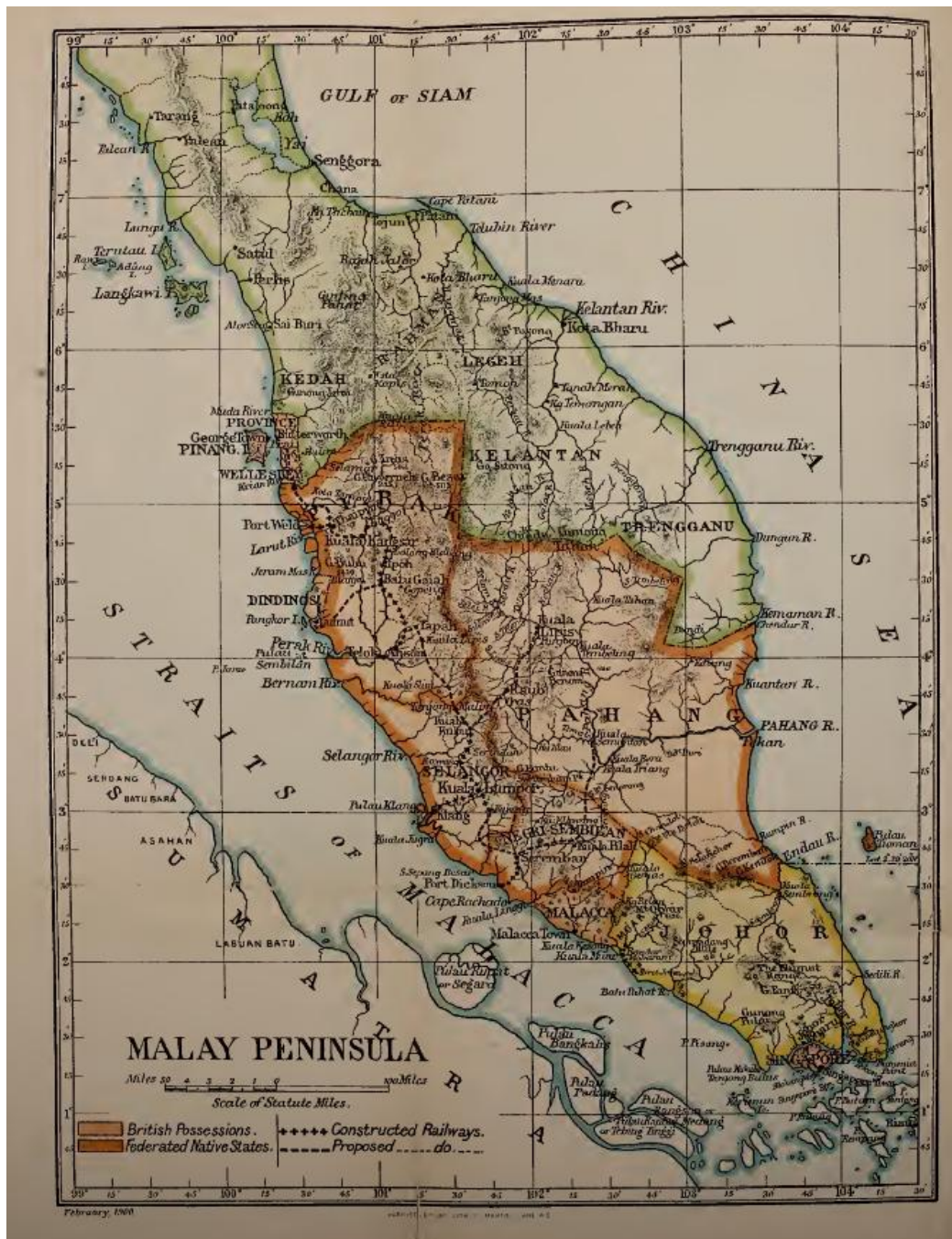


Figure 2. Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Map from H. Conway Belfield, *Handbook of the Federated Malay States*. Edward Stanford, 1902.



Figure 3. Modern Malaysia<sup>15</sup>

This history places Western justification of colonial conduct in counterpoint to the progressive East whose history preceded the West. Maugham's travel notes in East and Southeast Asia show his knowledge of Eastern history, art, religion, and philosophy, rather than flat generalisation and remote imagination. Maugham's approaches of recovering Eastern agency and criticising Eurocentric myths corresponds to Hobson's two-fold methodology and could be considered as Maugham's contribution to global modernism. Before concluding this introductory section, the following two paragraphs suggest two Western perspectives of observing the East, through knowledge and art, to bridge rather than separate East and West.

<sup>15</sup> Map from Virginia Matheson Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West*. Allen & Unwin, 2003, p. xix.

The Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci served the Ming court as an astronomer from 1601 to 1610 and facilitated the transmission of knowledge between East and West. He devoted himself to learning the Chinese language and culture, attaching importance to “knowledge” during the mission in the East (Fontana 26). He established close friendship with Chinese intellectuals, wrote in Chinese about Western developments in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and geography, and translated the Four Books of Confucianism into Latin. He collaborated with the Chinese scholar Xu Guangqi to translate Euclid’s *Elements* into Chinese and introduced Renaissance ideas in Chinese. He formed an intimate “network of friends” (Lo 221) among Chinese scholars, including Qu Taisu and Li Zhizao. After Ricci’s death in 1610, his Jesuit successors continued to promote the Christian–Confucian synthesis he pioneered (Kitson 29). In 2019, I visited the Xu Guangqi Memorial Hall<sup>16</sup> in Shanghai in memory of the two scholars’ cross-cultural contribution to knowledge transmission. This model of intellectual connection between East and West foregrounded Maugham’s interest in Chinese philosophy that extended beyond books, particularly in his active calling on a Confucian philosopher in Beijing.

The European contact with China in the nineteenth century, through imperial plundering and scientific expeditions, brought Chinese art and artifacts to Western museums and inspired those key figures who would go on to develop modernist poetry. Laurence Binyon, a “pioneering and authoritative curator” of Oriental Prints and Drawings at the British Museum (Huang “Laurence Binyon” 41), appreciated Chinese art as “a great and wonderful art” (Binyon “Chinese Paintings” 255–56). He acquired the famous Chinese scroll *Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies* in 1903, and two world-class collections in the British Museum, the Stein Collection and the Wegener Collection, in 1909 (Zhaoming Qian 9). Against the military background of “the Great Game” in Asia, Sir Marc Aurel Stein, the Budapest-born British linguistic scholar and archaeologist, uncovered in

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<sup>16</sup> In Guangqi Park, Xuhui District. The district is named after Xu Guangqi.

Dunhuang numerous seventh- to tenth-century Buddhist manuscripts, Tang Buddhist banner paintings and textiles (Zhaoming Qian 8). Olga-Julia Wegener collected a number of Chinese paintings between 1907 and 1909, when accompanying her husband Professor Georg Wegener on an expedition to China (Huang “Wegener Collection” 149). From June 1910 to April 1912, Binyon held an exhibition of 237 paintings, mostly from the two collections (Huang “Wegener Collection” 48), attracting a number of writers and artists including Ezra Pound and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) who would later be modernist pioneers. In America, Kakuzo Okakura (1862–1913) gave top priority to the acquisition of Chinese material as the curator of Asian art in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Zhaoming Qian 22). Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore drew inspiration from Chinese paintings and artifacts on exhibition in New York and Pennsylvania respectively (Zhaoming Qian 24, 30). These examples provide another model of understanding the East through artistic appreciation. Maugham’s travel notes in China closely observed and appreciated the Chinese scrolls, calligraphy, porcelain, and such artifacts as silk, jade, and a Kuan-Yin statue which he brought back to London. Maugham’s awareness of Chinese people’s artistic talent enabled his novel *The Painted Veil* to feature exquisite descriptions of the fictional Manchu princess and the Western characters’ Daoist epiphany.

### **East as Other, China Far and Near**

This section evaluates how nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and films contributed to the discourse of ‘East as Other’ in their depiction of Chinese subjects from distant imagination. Based on Westerners’ observations of Chinese labourers in gold mines and imagined features of their country, an entrenched stereotype emerged, depicting Chinese people as villains and opium-smokers. This stereotype, strengthened by the Yellow

Peril narratives and the Boxer Movement at the end of the nineteenth century, casts a long shadow on Western imagination of China and, to a degree, still haunts Maugham studies.<sup>17</sup>

This section does not adhere to postcolonial binaries. Instead, it recovers the intellectual link between Western-educated Chinese scholars and the Bloomsbury group as an alternative narrative. In Maugham's case, crucial intellectual links can be found in his conversations with two Chinese scholars at Peking University, the centre of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. The May Fourth Chinese intelligentsia had a tendency to 'other' traditional China by adopting Western intellectual trends. Maugham did not endorse this tendency but identified more with traditional China, going as far to criticise Westerners as "barbarians" (*OCS* 91). Maugham's awareness of Chinese modernisation endeavours and his dismay at the devaluation of Chinese traditions distinguished him from both the Western discourse of othering China and some radical Chinese scholars' self-othering.

My examples in this section focus on China, as its people were severely demonised by Eurocentric narratives, and its traditions othered by a generation of intellectual modernisers, all observed by Maugham. Maugham's understanding of China also underwent a progression: from the distant Himalayan witchery in *The Magician*, to the brief appearance of Mr Sung in the German boarding house in *Of Human Bondage*, to Maugham's arduous journey to China in 1919–20. Sometimes a few sentences betrayed the 'East as Other' ideology; for example, Maugham's dehumanised judgement of the Chinese boy Ah King, who accompanied him throughout his Malay travel: "I had never thought of him as a human being" (*Ah King* xii). Moved by the boy's tears at their departure, Maugham seemed to reflect on his earlier judgement and used the Chinese boy's name as the title of his short story collection to memorise the true heart and human emotions of Ah King.

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<sup>17</sup> Chunmei Du proposed a model of the 'Mobius Strip' to interpret Maugham's meeting with Gu Hongming in 1919, but she still seems to draw on the Limehouse stereotype and claims that Maugham was strongly influenced by the stereotype and this meeting was a failure. See Chunmei Du, "Travel Along the Mobius Strip: Somerset Maugham and Gu Hongming East of Suez." *International History Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–18, doi:10.1080/07075332.2013.820776.

The Yellow Peril fear that Asian populations might engulf European civilisation one day can be traced back to the thirteenth century, when the Mongol army rampaged across Europe before halting at the gates of Vienna in 1241–2 (Richards 1). Anti-China sentiments were intensified by Sinophobic Enlightenment philosophers in the late eighteenth century, depicting China as a stagnant, tyrannical country, leading to “the nineteenth-century view of China as a backwards nation, or worse, the Yellow Peril” (Kow 352). Hermann Knackfuss’s lithograph *Peoples of Europe, Defend Your Holiest Possessions* (Figure 4), under the commission of the German Emperor William II in 1895 following the Sino-Japanese War, famously promoted the Yellow Peril ideology in Europe. The lithograph represents European races, led by the Archangel Michael, defending themselves against the approaching Buddha seated on a dragon amidst a storm cloud from the East (Richards 12). The Yellow Peril stereotype was so strong that publications about China at that time, regardless of the authors’ intention, were often misread and distorted into the unified purpose of confirming an anti-China sentiment. This tendency demonstrates that ‘East as Other’ is not only a Eurocentric method of constructing a superior identity through narrative, but a reading pattern that emphasises such a self-fashioned identity and often leads to misreading.



Figure 4. Hermann Knackfuss, *Peoples of Europe, Defend Your Holiest Possessions* (1895)<sup>18</sup>

Most writers whose works betray an ‘East as Other’ tendency had never been to China. One example of Americans’ first contact with Chinese people was during the Gold Rush in the 1840s–50s, when Chinese labourers flocked to California first to work in the gold mines and later to help build the transcontinental railroad which would be completed in 1869. The Chinese workers, mostly male and from the lowest classes in China, left Americans with a dark impression as coarse and loathsome objects, leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. One major work during this period is Bret Harte’s poem ‘Plain Language from Truthful James’ (1870), featuring the Chinese character Ah Sin who plays tricks in a card game. The poem became swiftly popular in America, received as ‘anti-Chinese’, but in fact the author’s intention was to satirise anti-Chinese sentiments. Leaving

<sup>18</sup> The picture, title translation, and the following notes from Klaus Schlichtmann, “Positioning Germany’s Right-Wing Revival in Global Context.” *Beijing Law Review*, vol. 14, 2023, pp. 165–75, doi:10.4236/blr.2023.141009. pp. 163–64. This reproduced version appeared three years after its completion, on the eve of the Boxer Uprising, in the January 22, 1898 issue of the American magazine *Harper’s Weekly*.

aside the political background at the poem's publication, Harte was known to be sympathetic towards Chinese immigrants, and the magazine *Overland Monthly* which first published the poem embraced "cosmopolitan and liberal" (Penry 75) ideals. Harte's poem satirises anti-Chinese Western characters through irony: James may not be 'truthful' as he participates in the Irishman Bill's scheme of cheating Ah Sin (Amano 221). Harte's depiction of Bill's immediate violence was intended to lead his readers to sympathise with Ah Sin, but the prevalent racist prejudice clouded the recognition of satire and the original direction of sympathy. This example speaks to the limitations of Orientalist reading of Western authors, which also applies to Conrad, Forster, and Maugham.

Twentieth-century London witnessed the influx of Chinese immigrants, "mostly sailors employed on British vessels or the shopkeepers and lodging house masters who supported them" (Forman 195). Fiction surged concerning the possible threat posed by Chinese immigrants to the stability of the British imperial position after the Boxer Uprising. The Chinatowns in London, such as Limehouse and Pennyfields, were described as the "architectural uncanny: an environment of dark alleyways, tunnels, hidden passages and rooms, trapdoors that dump people into the Thames" (Forman 202), reminding readers of Arthur Conan Doyle's crime fictions circulating at that time. Literary works set in such Chinatowns, mostly the Limehouse district in London's East End, reflect a partial, distorted, demonised image of opium-addled Chinese immigrants and the tragic results of miscegenation involving Chinese men and white women. The historical record shows that in fact there were few opium dens, and many of them were more like social clubs (Richards 4). It is, however, the Chinatown myth that leads to contemporary Oriental interpretations of Maugham's China vignette 'The Opium Den.' In fact, Maugham's vignette overturns this racialized literary tradition by describing the opium den as "a cheerful spot, comfortable, homelike, and cosy" (OCS 61). 'The Opium Den' opens with a stereotyped stage setting of the "low and squalid" room and opium smokers – "on wretched pallets lie stupefied the

victims of the drug” (*OCS* 60) – with which Maugham was familiar. However, his on-the-spot impression in China is totally different: he was led into “a neat enough room, brightly lit” and saw an elderly gentleman “quietly reading a newspaper, with his long pipe by his side” (*OCS* 60). With humane eyes and a gentle stylistic touch, he visited another two rooms and observes Chinese customers’ friendly and peaceful moments of life, which reminded him of the beer houses in Berlin where men could relax after a day’s tiring work. Maugham concludes his vignette with a short sentence: “Fiction is stranger than fact” (*OCS* 61), implying that Limehouse fiction is mere distortion of fact.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the new art of cinema was providing novel entertainment experiences for Western audiences and imprinting the Chinese villain stereotype in popular culture. The earliest films, viewed by each audience member through a kinoscope, depicted Chinese characters more mildly: the mischievous laundry worker Hop Lee in *Chinese Laundry Scene* (1894),<sup>19</sup> and the historical moment when the Chinese viceroy Li Hongzhang (Li Hung Chang) landed in New York Harbour in 1896.<sup>20</sup> The mild tone was soon replaced by the hostile portrayal of Chinese characters with the advent of the Boxer Uprising, reflected in short films around 1900 and early narrative films after 1904 (Haddad). At the time Maugham visited China, Limehouse literature was being adapted to films, and the image of opium-indulged Chinese and the fear of miscegenation were entrenched and popular. Sax Rohmer’s serialised Fu Manchu novels (1913–1959), featuring Chinese villain Fu Manchu in the ‘mad scientist’ mould, the “Yellow Peril incarnate in one man” (Richards 12), was eternalised on the Hollywood screen. With Fu Manchu, the depiction of the evil Chinese took on an enduring and definitive international form (Spencer 125).

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<sup>19</sup> Produced by Edison Studios and directed by William Dickson and William Heise. Known as the first still-preserved comedy film. Viewed on [Youtube](#), 26 January 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Produced by American Mutoscope, filmed by James White. Li Hung Chang watched the film himself on the Parlor Mutoscope in 1901. Viewed on [Internet Archive](#), 26 January 2025.

The sympathetic depictions of Chinese characters were sidelined by this dominant image in popular Anglophone fiction and film, potentially contributing to the marginalisation of Maugham's works. Thomas Burke's short story 'The Chink and the Child' (1916) was adapted by D. W. Griffith into the silent film *Broken Blossoms* (1919). This film tells of the genuine love between the Chinese young man Cheng Huan and the American girl Lucy Burrows but ends in tragedy: Lucy was beaten to death by her drunkard father and Cheng Huan, heartbroken, kills the abuser with a gun and suicides at Lucy's body. Both fiction and film versions intensify the contrast between the good-hearted Chinese young man and the brutal and vicious Western man, although still being restricted by the stereotyped ideology that interracial love was impossible. Burke's short story collection *Limehouse Nights*, where this story first appeared, was rejected by many publishers before its publication by Grand Richards in 1916 and was immediately banned by libraries and condemned by *The Times* for "sentimentalizing inter-racial sex" (Richards 82). In the West, Griffith's Chinese films were viewed through the 'Yellow Peril' lens, but in 1920s Shanghai they were tremendously acclaimed for their humane portrayal of Chinese characters and even inspired early Chinese romance films (Jianhua Chen). *Broken Blossoms* was "adored" by Chinese audiences after its premiere on 19 February 1923, but three days later, it was banned by the authority of foreign settlements in Shanghai because of its scurrilous images of the Westerner (Jianhua Chen 28).

Similarly, Maugham's unusually mild and sympathetic tone in *On a Chinese Screen* was appreciated among Chinese intellectuals in the Republican Era (1912–1949). In Republican China, Maugham's style was received as a model of English writing and impacted on a generation of Chinese writers.<sup>21</sup> Three pieces among Maugham's travel notes

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<sup>21</sup> Most notably, Eileen Chang acknowledged her fiction had been heavily influenced by Somerset Maugham. However, scholarly comparison on the two authors is still limited to a colonial/postcolonial perspective. See Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, "Rewriting Colonial Encounters: Eileen Chang and Somerset Maugham." *Jouvert*, 5(2), 2001; Hanbing Tong, "Rewriting Cultural Hybridity: Postcolonial Mirror Images in Somerset Maugham

in China, ‘The Beast of Burden’ and ‘The Song of the River’, which closely observed and lamented the hardship of Chinese working-class people, along with ‘The Philosopher’, were collected in the first-year English textbook *Freshman Readings in English* at National Southwestern Associated University<sup>22</sup> (1937–1946) in Kunming and New Asia College in Hong Kong from its foundation in 1949. The positive reception of Maugham’s works among Chinese intellectuals has confirmed Maugham’s humanistic touch and further continues his East–West intellectual connection.

The Chinese pursuit of modernisation was initiated by intellectuals educated in Western countries. While Europeans depicted China as a backward and tyrannic country and its people as opium-indulged devils, Chinese intellectuals were seeking knowledge from the West for practical purposes after the military defeat of the First Opium War. Yung Wing, the first Chinese who studied in America and graduated from Yale in 1854, persuaded the Qing government to initiate the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM), a program that began sponsoring Chinese students to study in America in 1871 (Hsu 28). Although in 1881, the Qing government recalled most CEM students, fearing that they would be “denationalized”, these students played leading roles in China’s industrial modernisation after they returned, working on the railroads, mining, international trade and business, and the diplomatic service (Hsu 30). The second CEM surge was funded by the Boxer Indemnity returned by Western powers, first by America in 1908, with a hope of exerting American influence on Chinese education. Earlier in 1901, the Qing government signed the humiliating Boxer Protocol which required the payment of a huge amount of indemnity (equal to \$333 million under the exchange rates at that time) to foreign nations after the Boxers’ defeat by the Eight-Nation Alliance, leading to the bankruptcy of the Qing

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and Eileen Chang.” Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2024.  
<https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/41903>.

<sup>22</sup> The education centre in the Republic of China (ROC), existing from 1938 to 1946, formed by the wartime incorporation of National Peking University, National Tsinghua University, and National Nankai University.

government. Other countries followed the American move to fund Chinese students to study in their countries using the Boxer Indemnity. Tsinghua College<sup>23</sup> was established with this fund as a preparatory school in Beijing which was “run in the American way” and would send “a steady flow of students to the United States” from 1912 to 1929 (Hsu 47). On the one hand, students funded by the Boxer Indemnity Fellowships changed Americans’ dismissive attitude of gold-mine Chinese labourers into a respectful one towards Chinese intellectuals, distinguished by “individual capacities and calibre”; on the other hand, these students accelerated domestic modernisation by serving “key positions in the educational systems” in China “as presidents, deans, and professors, and in government ministries” (Hsu 43, 50).

These Western-educated Chinese students would soon participate in the formation of Chinese literary modernisation, canonically dated to May 4, 1919. On that day, students in Beijing demonstrated in protest against the Chinese government’s humiliating policy toward Japan, resulting in a series of strikes and associated events amounting to a social ferment and an intellectual revolution (Chow 1). Chen Pingyuan, a leading contemporary scholar of modern Chinese literature, attributed the ‘May Fourth Movement’ to three inter-related components: “intellectual enlightenment, literary revolution, and political protest” (vii). The new generation of intellectuals upheld cosmopolitanism and embraced modern Western values which would help shape modern China’s politics and culture. Some radical leftwing intellectuals, such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu, advocated democracy, science, and Marxist ideology; some moderate intellectuals, represented by Hu Shi, opposed Marxism but favoured pragmatism over Confucian doctrine (Pingyuan Chen 12). Both sides of the May Fourth reformers founded magazines and periodicals to disseminate their claims and innovations on vernacular Chinese literature. Their influence on the coming decades of

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<sup>23</sup> “Qinghua Xuetang” in Chinese. The college changed its name to National Tsinghua University in 1928.

Chinese literature could be compared with, but probably outstripped, the impact of ‘little magazines’ on the development of Anglo-American modernism.

Contemporary scholarship on modern Chinese literature does not emphasise the process of inscribing and being inscribed by Western values in May Fourth literature, but shifts attention to how May Fourth literary modernisation, despite the Western influence, continues from Late Qing fiction and participates in the formation of global modernism.<sup>24</sup> David Der-wei Wang’s edited book *A New Literary History of Modern China* (2017) refutes the idea that China encountered “belated modernity” compared with its Western counterpart. Instead, he argues that “even at its earliest stages, modern Chinese literature had complex conceptions of the modern that existed independently from the conceptions offered by the West” (*New Literary History* 15). Most essays in Wang’s book touch on travel and transculturation, contending that “modern Chinese literature is a part of the global circulation of discourses and practices of modernity” (*New Literary History* 18). Chinese literature therefore actively participated in and contributed to global modernism. The May Fourth Movement in 1919 almost coincided with its Western counterpart, and Chinese intellectuals had connections with the Bloomsbury Group. Patricia Laurence’s *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* maps out the intimate relationships between two parallel literary communities: the Bloomsbury group in London and the Crescent Moon group in Beijing. The Crescent Moon group was established by Western-educated intellectuals such as Hu Shi, Xu Zhimo (C. H. Hsu), Chen Yuan, and his wife, intellectual and writer Ling Shuhua, who identified with English liberalism and whose works thrived around 1925–33 (Laurence *Chinese Eyes* 2–3). The Crescent Moon group embraced Romanticism rather than Marxism, endangering themselves for being labelled ‘politically incorrect’ in relation to 1930s socialist ideology, in contrast to another literary group, the

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<sup>24</sup> See David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-De-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849–1911*. Stanford University Press, 1997.

Chinese League of Left-wing Writers, that saw art and literature as weapons for their revolutionary activities (Laurence *Chinese Eyes* 106–08). Heavily influenced by his Cambridge education (1921–1922), Xu Zhimo experimented with the *abab* rhyme and free line break from Romantic traditions in his Chinese poem ‘Farewell Again to Cambridge’ (1928), integrating the traditional Chinese metrical style that makes the poem musical and formally new (Zhimin Li 111). Xu met Katherine Mansfield in London and returned to China to translate her stories. Ling Shuhua sent Virginia Woolf chapters of her memoir, *Ancient Melodies*, in the 1930s, praised by Woolf for its “charm in the very unlikeness,” and this book was published by Hogarth Press in 1957 (Laurence “Shared Affinities” 41–43). In addition, E. M. Forster had an enduring friendship with the Chinese writer and scholar Xiao Qian<sup>25</sup> (Hsiao Chien) who studied at Cambridge, in 1941–42. Forster even shared the manuscripts of *Maurice* with Xiao Qian in 1943 and discussed this unpublished novel in their letters (Laurence *Chinese Eyes* 196). These letters were carefully collected and titled ‘Friendship Gazette’ by Xiao Qian and are now preserved in the archives of King’s College, Cambridge.<sup>26</sup>

These Chinese literary movements and East–West connections frame how Maugham’s scholarly networks, forged during his stay in Beijing in 1919, might be understood. He met at least two Western-educated Chinese intellectuals at Peking University and expressed his concern about the May Fourth intellectuals’ radical departure from Chinese tradition. Maugham’s cultural position aligns with David Der-wei Wang’s contention that major themes in Late Qing fiction anticipate the predominate concerns with nationhood and subjectivity in (post-) May Fourth literature (Sang 157). The two scholars

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<sup>25</sup> Xiao Qian was also the translator of *Ulysses* into Chinese. Patrica Laurence visited Xiao Qian in 1995 in Beijing, in preparation of *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes*. I know this detail from Xiao’s former student who is currently a professor in Beijing.

<sup>26</sup> See Correspondence between E.M. Forster and Hsiao Chien (Xiao Qian), 1941–1944, GBR/0272/EMF/18/265. Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. [https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/7/archival\\_objects/276746](https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/7/archival_objects/276746). Accessed January 27, 2025.

Maugham met are interestingly juxtaposed: Gu Hongming (Ku Hung-Ming), a “philosopher” aged 64, a resolute defender of traditional Chinese culture, and Song Chunfang (T. F. Soong), “a student of drama” aged 27, a May Fourth reformer who keenly learned from the West. Chinese critics generally believe that Maugham’s sketches in *On a Chinese Screen* show his admiration for Gu Hongming while disparaging Song Chunfang. These attitudes reflect Maugham’s disapproval of May Fourth reformers’ othering of traditional China by radically embracing Western values. Maugham’s tone in describing Gu Hongming is more sympathetic and tender, showing his identification with traditional China against the historical background of double othering (China othered by the West, and radical Chinese intellectuals’ self-othering). Maugham’s sketches document two-way cultural transmission through his learnings from Gu Hongming on the autonomy of traditional Chinese culture and his teachings on modern Western drama to the younger scholar Song Chunfang.

Gu and Song were both teaching at Peking University in 1919, under the management of President Cai Yuanpei, an educationist renowned for his “inclusiveness” and “freedom of thought” (Pingyuan Chen 151). Hu Shi was also teaching at the university, appearing briefly as “Professor of Chinese Philosophy” (OCS 120) in Maugham’s vignette about Song Chunfang. Hu and Song were good friends and shared similar progressive intellectual stances (Soong 86). Song Chunfang’s son Stephen C. Soong, an accomplished poet, essayist, and translator in Hong Kong, was infuriated by Maugham’s ironical comparison of his reformist father to the Spirit of the River<sup>27</sup> for his narrow knowledge and vision. Maugham wrote: “It is useless to argue with a pedagogue, as the Spirit of the Ocean [...] remarked to the Spirit of the River” (OCS 120), probably because, as Stephen Soong pointed out, his father Song Chunfang was dismissive of the *Zhuangzi*, which he believed

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<sup>27</sup> Alluding to the ‘Autumn Floods’ chapter in *Zhuangzi*, *The Chuang Tzu*, translated by James Legge, Chinese Ancient Classic Press, *The Bilingual Reading of the Chinese Classics*. pp 108–131.

was “not doing contemporary society any positive good” (Soong 86). Maugham was disappointed by the young scholar’s disparagement of ancient Chinese philosophy, which Maugham appreciated, and considered it a pity that modern China was losing its traditions.

The Chinese version of Stephen Soong’s essay was first published in 1966, and its English version “Somerset Maugham and My Father” (translated by Diana Yue) was first published in *Renditions* in 1974 and later collected in *The Best China: Essays from Hong Kong* (2020) edited by John Minford. In his introduction, Minford comments that Song Chunfang was “mercilessly satirised” by Maugham and “many years later his son wrote this witty rebuttal of the sketch” (Soong et al. 137–38). Maugham described Song Chunfang as a Western-educated young professor “in European clothes” and “gold-rimmed spectacles”, who “expressed himself fluently in English, French, and German” (*OCS* 119). Song was only an emerging scholar at the time of meeting Maugham, but he would soon become “the pioneer of modern Chinese drama theory” who introduced Western drama to China and modern Chinese drama to the West (Hu 28). Maugham knew that “he had lately written, in French, a work on the Chinese theatre” (*OCS* 119), *La Littérature chinoise contemporaine* published in 1919 by the Peking Journal Printing House (Guo 44). Rather than being ignorant of Western literature when asked by Maugham, as his son points out Song Chunfang was actually an expert who had introduced a series of Western novelists to Chinese readers (Soong 85). Song seemed to lose his cultural confidence as a Chinese scholar as he behaved extremely humbly in proactively calling on and seeking guidance from Maugham, whom Song believed to rank at the top of English drama with Oscar Wilde (Soong 82). Maugham’s title ‘A Student of Drama’ also reflects Song’s humble attitude, and Maugham did share a personal example of Henry James Jones’s composition of drama with Song Chunfang (*SU* 123–24). Maugham’s vignette satirises what he sees as the young Chinese scholar’s radical reformist cosmopolitanism by learning from the West while othering his own culture as inferior.

On the contrary, Gu Hongming is portrayed as an old-fashioned Confucian philosopher “tall, with a thin grey queue [braided hair], and bright large eyes” and his exceedingly thin figure is dressed in traditional Chinese clothes: a “black gown”, a “little black cap” and “dark grey trousers” (*OCS* 93), reminiscent of his service as “secretary to one of the Empress Dowager’s greatest viceroys” (*OCS* 91). In his earlier years, Gu “took the Ph.D. in Berlin” and “studied for some time in Oxford” (*OCS* 93); however, he studied Western philosophy only to prove that “wisdom after all was to be found within the limits of the Confucian canon” (*OCS* 94). Maugham’s vignette corresponds to the biographical facts of Gu’s life: Gu was born in Penang to a Chinese immigrant family in 1857, and educated in English literature at the University of Edinburgh. In 1879 he returned to Penang, and in his late twenties he studied classical Chinese and Confucian classics and worked in China for most of his life (Chunmei Du “Gu Hongming” 720–21). After the 1911 Revolution,<sup>28</sup> Gu continued to endorse the monarchical system and therefore became the object of hostility from the May Fourth radicals (722). He taught English literature at Peking University, the centre of the New Culture Movement, until Cai Yuanpei’s resignation from the presidential role in August 1920 (Wu). Gu’s adult life was dedicated to introducing traditional Chinese culture to the Western world. Most of his works were written in English, including four monographs, translations of Confucian classics, and numerous articles (Chunmei Du “Gu Hongming” 722).

Maugham empathised with Gu Hongming’s marginalised position as a conservative Confucian in opposition to the progressive Westernised intellectuals. This empathy is important as both scholars did not fit into the mainstream intellectual tendency of their times: Maugham against then-dominant Yellow Peril narratives, Gu Hongming against China’s Westernisation. Nevertheless, Maugham and Gu had similar cultural positions of

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<sup>28</sup> When the Qing Dynasty collapsed. In the following year, the imperial system was replaced by Republic of China.

preferring traditional Chinese thought to Western values. Before his visit, Maugham knew that Gu “scornfully” dismissed “the sumptuous buildings of the foreign university and the useful science of the barbarians” (*OCS* 91). Gu Hongming also knew Maugham’s “countrymen deal only with coolies and with compradores” (*OCS* 93). In 1919, Hu Shi invited his teacher John Dewey from Harvard University to teach at Peking University, and Dewey’s pragmatism was enthusiastically advocated by the Chinese professors except Gu Hongming. Maugham probably knew this background because he asked for Gu’s opinion on pragmatism. The philosopher answers, “Are you speaking of Pragmatism? It is the last refuge of those who want to believe the incredible. I have more use for American petroleum than for American philosophy” (*OCS* 94). Maugham’s portrayal of Gu Hongming is sympathetic and intimate: he refers to Gu as a “friend” (*OCS* 93), records his fond interactions with his youngest daughter and his calligraphic writing of two erotic poems, adding humanity and emotional closeness to the philosopher. When Gu said his braided hair is a symbol of himself as “the last representative of the old China,” Maugham is filled with pity, thinking Gu was a “somewhat pathetic figure” who belonged to old China but was considered obsolete by modern China (*OCS* 96). Gu’s intention of asking Maugham to stay longer and to give him a farewell gift of his own calligraphy implies that the Chinese scholar cherished his connection with Maugham, to the extent that he shared a part of his personal life. Maugham’s sketch records the intellectual affinity between himself and Gu Hongming, marginalised by their respective times and spaces, but establishing deep connection during their short meeting. Both intellectuals were othered in their own culture, so their empathetic affinity is built on otherness: Gu’s otherness “reflects and revitalizes the otherness within Maugham” (Yanping Zhang 55). Their intellectual connection continued in Maugham’s works after Maugham left China: Chapter Two will analyse how Gu’s imperialist critique in ‘The Philosopher’ would translate to a fictional Chinese character in Maugham’s play and his own subtle critique in his non-fiction.

This section has reviewed how the imagined Yellow Peril narratives became ingrained in Western consolidation of self-fashioned imperialist identity and how Maugham's close observation in his travel accounts revealed the falsity of these narratives, alongside his understanding of China's modern history and classic learnings. Unlike the May Fourth intellectuals who sought to learn from the West, Maugham cherished traditional Chinese culture and lamented its devaluation during the May Fourth Movement. These examples show that Maugham did not simply view China as a constructed Eurocentric 'Other' but intellectually appreciated and connected with traditional China, which was othered by modern Chinese intellectuals. Maugham's approach differs from his contemporaries, such as, on the one hand, Ezra Pound, who drew inspiration largely from ancient Chinese poetry but paid little attention to recent intellectual revolutions, and on the other hand, Andre Malraux who was primarily interested in political movements in modern China but neglected traditional philosophy and aesthetics. Maugham's cultural position distinguishes him from both Eurocentric narratives and May Fourth narratives that self-othered Chinese traditions. His scholarly network at a critical site and moment of Chinese modern history is significant in bridging East and West through intellectual connections that would withstand Orientalist criticism.

### **East as Reference, Mirroring West**

This section examines the 'East as Reference' model where early-twentieth-century Western writers view the East as a referential counterpart to the social and political conditions in their own countries. I begin by glossing how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers referred to Confucianism and Chinese governance. Then I select several key figures in twentieth-century literature, drawing from each a classic piece of writing about the East: Frantz Kafka's 'The Great Wall of China' (written in 1917, published posthumously in 1930), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), Hermann

Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922), Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), Andre Malraux's *Man's Fate* (1933), and W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *Journey to a War* (1939). With the exception of Kafka, all the selected authors had been to India or China at the time of these publications, and their depiction of the relevant Eastern country developed one recurring theme central to each author's writing life. In this way, the East became a psychological, theological, or humanistic counterpart to Western traditions, enabling the author to distance themselves from and reflect on their own culture. My selected authors range across different countries: England (Forster), France (Malraux), Germany (Hesse) and the United States (Buck). The time span of these selected works coincides with Maugham's Eastern travels and the publication of most of his major works (1910s–30s).

The 'East as Reference' model differs from the 'East as Other' model in that it observes the East more closely through intellectual reflection and transnational travel, often exposing authors to a reality far beyond Eurocentric discourse. Such distance enables the expatriate writer to develop a cross-cultural perspective and become critical of their own cultural conventions. However, the contact between East and West is still limited because these literary responses find parallel with the author's other works and tend only to engage with limited aspects of one Eastern country. Christopher Isherwood is an exception. His later conversion to Hinduism might be related to Maugham: after his journey to China, Isherwood met Maugham in London in November 1938 after Maugham's travel to India. They became important friends and often discussed Vedantic philosophy in their letters, leading to the philosophical 'East as Method' in Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge*. I will introduce more about their friendship and Vedantic communication in Chapter Four.

Maugham's Eastern writings fit the 'East as Reference' model because they are anchored in topics central to Maugham's life and work, such as human bondage and freedom. Since Klaus Jonas's 1959 anthology, a scholarly consensus has been reached that travel for Maugham is a way of searching for models of freedom, demonstrated most

notably in Robert Calder's comprehensive monograph *W. Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom* (1972). As my archival research will show in Chapter Two, Maugham expressed his initial critique of what he perceived as self-centred British ideology and religion in his unpublished autobiographical novel written in his twenties. The early pages in the nonfiction *A Writer's Notebook*, dated to the 1890s, also document young Maugham's reflection on unjustified violence during the Boer War and his aesthetic observation of Chinese artisanship (see this chapter's epigraph). During his travels, the East becomes a reflective mirror that enables Maugham to view European conventions from an outsider's position, bringing in his prior knowledge of and close contact with Asian people, art, and philosophy. Maugham's cross-cultural awareness extends all over South, East, and Southeast Asia, and his writing is not limited to one book about the East, which makes Maugham a unique case that fits but also goes some distance beyond the 'East as Reference' model.

On a note of personal identity, Maugham's homosexuality plays a significant part in his critical reflection of the West. Traveling to the East enabled the writer to find temporary liberation from British legislation and to express his authentic self. This also applies to the other three homosexual British writers in this chapter: Forster, Auden, and Isherwood. India and China became crucial sites where these authors witnessed colonial atrocity which further dissolved their identification with British nationality coupled with long-term marginalisation. After their journey to China, Auden and Isherwood permanently forfeited their British nationality and emigrated to the United States. Stuart Christie argues that Auden's experiences in China and Hong Kong "ultimately motivates his symbolic disinvestment from all national-colonial allegories" (1577). Auden's 'Sonnets from China' underpinning his cross-cultural predicament, termed "disorientation" by Christie (1578), were strongly influenced by E. M. Forster's depiction of globalising India and collapsing imperialist England. These moments of disorientation open up a field of cross-cultural

modernism, which takes place in an Asian country to keep necessary distance from the mainstream English literary canon.

The East as bearer of symbolic meaning can be found in all my selected authors: China as displaced Austro-Hungarian Empire for Kafka, the down-to-earth literary ideal for Pearl Buck, and the revolutionary spirit for Malraux; India as cultural impediment that causes an impossibility of human connection for Forster, and spiritual progression for Hesse. The ‘East as Reference’ model focuses on how East Asia becomes a heterogeneous, reflective, and decisive component of Western modern literature. This section does not include works by Joseph Conrad and George Orwell because these will be subjects of a separate discussion in Chapter Two. Before entering twentieth-century literary depictions of Asia under the ‘East as Reference’ model, the following section first introduces the Enlightenment heritage of reference to the East as models for a modern rationality that emerged in the West.

In his dissertation at Oxford University, *China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1937),<sup>29</sup> Qian Zhongshu, the Chinese scholar, writer and bibliographer, repeatedly uses the word “reference” when mentioning China in Western literature. Qian’s substantial study shows that, in England, Sinophilism<sup>30</sup> was at its height in the seventeenth century, but suffered an eclipse in the eighteenth century, falling into a conventional mode of Sinophobia<sup>31</sup> that saw Chinese civilisation as “stationary” and “inferior to the European in science” (Zhongshu Qian 202–03). After grappling with Qian’s assessment, Longxi Zhang concludes that, at this stage, “China was yet more legendary than real”, and English men of letters reflected on China with an interest more humanistic

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<sup>29</sup> See Qian Zhongshu (Chung-shu Ch’ien), “China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century,” *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* (Dec. 1940): 351–84. See also Qian, “China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (I),” pp. 7–48, and “China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century (II),” *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* (Dec. 1941): 113–52. The manuscript is formally typed out and bound up in a volume in Bodleian Library.

<sup>30</sup> The general admiration for China.

<sup>31</sup> The general dislike of China.

than pragmatic (“Myth” 118). This shows that, in the Enlightenment movement towards rationalism, although the ‘East as Other’ pattern still existed, European thinkers started to ‘reference’ China as a part of their philosophical inquiry and speculations on Western issues.

Up to the advent of the eighteenth century, according to Jesuits’ accounts, China was idealised by Europeans as the most crucial empire of wealth and fertility, with inexhaustible potential for British exports and luxury goods (Markley 518). However, this socioeconomic fantasy collapsed during the eighteenth century. China gradually fell into an inferior, stagnant, and backward image in Western literary representations. The commodities imported into England from China – porcelain, silk, tea, fans, screens, and so on – were described as “culturally feminized chinoiserie” by novelists, most notably Daniel Defoe (Markley 518): his character Robinson Crusoe sneered at “the gross and absurd ignorance of the Chinese of the motion of heavenly bodies”, and Defoe’s reference to China in his other works all dealt with trade and cargo (Zhongshu Qian 150–51). Enlightenment philosophers remained somewhat independent from this commercial perspective; they referenced the East in philosophical works, attempting to “reconcile ethical universalism and cultural diversity” (Kow 347). However, these philosophical reflections sometimes are “hegemonic, imperialist discourses masked as universalism” (Kow 354), for example, Montesquieu’s harsh critique of Chinese static and despotic customs in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), and similarly Adam Smith’s belief that China, however prosperous, has no inclination to move forward (Markley 523). Both philosophers are dismissive of China as a “stationary” nation (Dodds 48) in contrast to the Western value of progress. These Sinophobic judgements of China failed to overcome the ‘East as Other’ misconceptions associated with Western superiority.

On the other side, Sinophilic philosophers, such as Leibniz, Wolff, Voltaire, and Hume, drew secular nourishment from Chinese thought as an alternative to Western religion. Particularly, Confucianism offers a model for Western social and political arrangements in the seventeenth century. This Sinophilic tendency endorsed the view that

Chinese ethics, especially Confucian morality, influenced “the rise and development of secularism”, a distinctive feature of the Enlightenment movement (Rogacz 68). Most representatively, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s organismic metaphysics finds striking resemblance to the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in China, significantly having changed the European understanding of the world “from a machine to an organism” (Yu Liu “Leibniz and China” 30). Leibniz’s organic view of the world has been followed by a very long line of Western thinkers: from Christian Wolff, whose idealisation of Confucian morality caused indignation in Europe (Rogacz 75), to Alfred North Whitehead in the twentieth century (Yu Liu “Leibniz and China” 32), and even Hegel who was generally considered dismissive of Chinese philosophy (Smith). However, Leibniz did not distinguish Neo-Confucianism from ancient Confucianism.<sup>32</sup> Neo-Confucianism, based on ancient Confucianism but also absorbing influences from Daoism and Buddhism, also significantly impacted Emerson and other American transcendentalists. This line of influence will be introduced in the next section ‘East as Method’.

The above examples reveal a pattern in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers referred to China as a part of their reflection on key Western values emerging in the Enlightenment movement, such as progress and secularism. The ‘East as Reference’ model does not only apply to philosophy, but politics, literature, and social customs. Voltaire, another recognised Sinophile, extolled China’s “secular universal history” and admired Confucius’s deism that enables the continuity of Chinese civilisation (Rogacz 77). Voltaire adapted a classic Chinese play from the Yuan Dynasty into a French play *L’Orphelin de la Chine*, glorifying “the ultimate transformative power of morality” (Hsia 81). Similarly, David Hume appreciated the monarchical Chinese government moderated by highly educated officials, which he believed “could provide an example for the inadequacies

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<sup>32</sup> Even some scholars did not distinguish the two philosophical schools in China. See D. E. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord*. University of Hawaii Press, 1977.

of Western politics and priesthood” (Dodds 48). Chinese meritocracy sustained by the *keju* exam system provides another reference for Western governments perniciously influenced by heredity or the church. In the mid-eighteenth century, there was a call among British magazines to establish a meritocratic exam system in England like *keju* in China, which culminated in 1806 when the East India Company selected men for service in India through a competitive examination in London, inspired by the traders’ experience in Canton (Platt 56).

This Enlightenment model of referencing China sets a foundation for later literary writers to draw critical reflections upon Western social and political arrangements. Turning to twentieth-century literary works that refer to the East, it is hard to draw a distinct demarcation between the ‘East as Reference’ and the ‘East as Method’ models, similar to my previous point that an ‘East as Other’ residue remains in eighteenth century Sinophobic thinkers’ philosophy. My selected twentieth-century authors (for example, Herman Hesse) referred to the East in reflecting on the development of modern psychology and used Buddhism as a method to explore psychological progress. Similarly, Ezra Pound not only referred to Chinese poetry but also experimented with the ‘dynamic’ feature of Chinese written characters and poetics to rejuvenate ‘static’ English poetry. ‘Reflective’ and ‘reflexive’ features co-exist in these literary works.<sup>33</sup> ‘East as Reference’ is reflective in taking a cross-cultural perspective and deliberately contemplating Western civilisation through literary representation. ‘Reflexion’ requires the author to interrogate poetic conventions, defamiliarise elements of poetry such as rhyme and the subject matter, to reconceptualise modern literature (Webb 118–19), which could be considered as ‘East as Method’ and will be elaborated in the next section. The three reading modes I set up in this chapter, ‘East as Other’, ‘East as Reference’, and ‘East as Method’, can be applied to literary

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<sup>33</sup> I borrow the concept of ‘reflexion’ from Creative Writing Studies. For etymology and further definitional survey, see Jen Webb, “Writing as Research.” in *Researching Creative Writing*, Frontinus Ltd, 2015, pp. 103–26.

analysis of any Western writer who wrote about the East. This methodology aims to be more sophisticated than a postcolonial framework, effective not only in the following chapters on Maugham, but also in future scholarly discussions on a later generation of cross-cultural writers not included in this thesis, such as Marguerite Duras and Anthony Burgess.

Franz Kafka's fragmented, unfinished story 'The Great Wall of China' is mainly narrated from a builder's first-person perspective, sometimes shifting to first-person plural to represent working-class people, in order to describe the piecemeal construction of the Great Wall, separately and illogically built in sections of five hundred metres. In this story, "the Great Wall is the Great War" (Paris 462), and Kafka's China is a reference to the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war. In November 1916, the long-reigning Emperor Franz Josef I died; in March 1917, Kafka started working on this China story (Holm 137). Kafka's China defending against nomads is a reference to the Austro-Hungarian Empire defending against the armies of the allied powers, and the "two great armies of workers, the eastern and western" that build the Great Wall alludes to Austrians and Hungarians as the builders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Kafka "Great Wall"). The narrator reads from a scholar that the Great Wall is "a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel" (Kafka "Great Wall"). The Babel Tower metaphor may suggest the incommunicability between the Austrians and Hungarians, an oblique critique of the loosely organised empire, and the incommunicability between the emperor and his people. In a fragmentary section among Kafka's China pages in his notebook written in 1917, published separately as 'An Imperial Message' in 1919, the dying emperor's message could never be delivered to his people: "No one pushes his way through here, certainly not someone with a message from a dead man" (Kafka "Message"). In 'The Great Wall of China', the hardworking builders have little knowledge of the emperor endangered by "malice and enmity clothed as servants and friends"; "The people will never know anything about these struggles and sufferings" (Kafka

“Great Wall”). Like the inaccessible castle, the meaning in Kafka’s China parable is gnomic, and like most of Kafka’s other heroes, his Chinese narrator is “inside and outside society at the same time” (Rolleston 110).

Kafka’s fragmentary narrative is, like his Great Wall, built piecemeal: there is no logical, sequential relationship between one fictional block and another, yet the blocks altogether constitute a working context that suggest reasons, however opaque, for his parable. Although Kafka was fascinated with Confucian and Daoist classics which he read in German translations,<sup>34</sup> ‘the Great Wall’ was “supremely his own creation” (Spence 193). The historical background is vague: there is no information about the dynasty or the identity of the Chinese emperor. Kafka abstracted the Great Wall from the time and space of Chinese history, creating a pure cultural symbol and its building process a parable. Maugham also uses Eastern symbols and parables as modes of reference. In a key chapter in *Of Human Bondage*, the main character Philip Carey remembers a parable from the East: the dying Eastern King realises life is suffering, an idea Maugham inherited from Schopenhauer that will be explored in Chapter Four. In *The Painted Veil*, the impenetrable Manchu princess is a symbol for the cultural sublime, diving into the deep time and rich cultural connotations of imperial China, which I will discuss in Chapter Three. For Kafka, human existence is insignificant in the face of universal absurdity, as his recurring theme suggests, “the improbability of existence itself” (Rolleston xv). These Eastern parables and symbols refer to inscrutable meanings that exceed the language of one single culture.

In *A Passage to India*, E. M. Forster references India to “test the ideal” of human connections by confronting English characters with another race, international relations, and the aesthetic and mystical appeal of Islam and Hinduism (Martin 146). In Forster’s other novels, such ideals were also measured against another set of values in order to be tested. The caves in *A Passage to India*, like *Howards End* in its eponymous novel, become a

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<sup>34</sup> See Yanbing Zeng and Yuan Li, *Franz Kafka and Chinese Culture*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

crucial site to test the ideal of the spirit against the material, and one repeated theme in both novels is “the realisation of failed connection” (Martin 166). *A Passage to India* contrasts “Western forms of reasoning and logic” with the “illusory emotionalism and mysticism of the East”, the former often being defeated (Martin 154). Then, the novel explores ‘connection’ in a global sense: the connection between East and West. In an unpublished paper written in 1913, Forster launched some harsh criticism against Rudyard Kipling, condemning his subject matter by stating: “imperialism is not literature” (Shaheen 38). However, Forster in turn became a target of postcolonial criticism decades later. With India’s emerging nationalist consciousness and development of postcolonialism in the twentieth century, Indian scholars paid more attention to the discursive relationship between Britain and India in Forster’s novel: critics such as Nirad Chaudhuri and M. K. Naik criticise *A Passage to India* as a political allegory (Lowe 124). Similarly, Edward Said finds the novel’s resolution incomplete because the power of nationalist resistance has been overlooked (200–01).

Leaving aside the postcolonial perspective, Forster’s novel suggests “something wider than politics”, something about seeking a lasting home for human beings, something “philosophical and poetic” (Shaheen 93). The Marabar Caves remain elusive, “a lacuna or aporia” which leads to the hermeneutic dilemma that “the novel itself refuses to explain, despite the presence of an omniscient narrator” (Childs “A Passage to India” 191). This comprises a blank moment in the narrative, the unknown, the inscrutable, similar to Kafka’s Great Wall. The heroic act of Forster’s characters is that, living with the unknown, they still try to connect with each other, aware of inevitable failure. Forster invites his readers to contemplate “what we mean by knowing and not knowing, and how and whether we can learn to live with the latter” (Cavalié and Mellet 50). Forster’s hero challenges the limits of knowledge, despite its eventual futility. This is reminiscent of Hemingway’s fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea* who battles with the limits of human force. Forster’s reference to

India tests the limits of Western reason. His novel does not explore the depth of Indian philosophy but only refers to Islam and Hinduism. These mysterious signifiers have destabilised Western values of reason and logic and replaced them with the unknown. In Maugham's *The Painted Veil*, the heroine Kitty knows very little of Chinese culture, but she seems to grasp something historical and poetic in an epiphanic moment of seeing the Manchu Princess. The Manchu Princess is an 'inscrutable' cultural signifier for Kitty but is the embodiment of Chinese culture for the Manchu Princess's husband Waddington, who is familiar with Daoism. For Kitty, East is Reference; for Waddington, East is Method.

André Malraux's most famous novel *Man's Fate* (better translated as 'The Human Condition' from *La Condition humaine*) is set against the backdrop of Chinese revolutions. The novel tells of the failed communist insurrection in Shanghai in 1927 against the Kuomintang government, delving into deep questions about human existence in the face of death and oppression rather than merely narrating political events. One moving scene in this novel is when Kyo Gisors, the commander of the revolt, chooses to take his own life with cyanide during imprisonment in an act of strong self-determination. *Man's Fate* is a tragedy, and according to Kenneth Burke's idea of tragedy, the protagonists undertake an action that appears to be possible, but as they come to realise the action will never succeed, they are impelled to continue, moving to a climax of disaster (Frohock 17). Kyo Gisors and other revolutionaries face death with equanimity and dignity, holding onto their faith until the end of their lives. *Man's Fate* not only explores the "emotional significance and moral impact" (Spence 165) of dedicated action, but also elevates historical facts into existential questions about the limits of being human in the face of inevitable failure and death.

The heroic action of Malraux's characters aligns with Nietzsche's "rapture of the Dionysian state, with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence" in *The Birth of Tragedy* (61). In his early years, Malraux was "obsessed with Nietzsche" and admired Nietzsche the most among philosophers (Foster 256). His earlier epistolary novel

*The Temptation of the West* (1926) juxtaposes an Apollonian West and a Dionysian East and resolves in Nietzsche's affirmation of the Dionysian in the presence of Apollo, or the Western ideal of reason and order (Foster 266). Malraux refers to the Chinese revolution to explore the limits of human existence and the meaning of life. Similar to Forster's India, Malraux's China is set up as a Dionysian confrontation with the European values of reason, faced with a Nietzschean void, calling for aesthetic spirituality to fill it. Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* also poses fundamental inquiries into human existence. A generation earlier than Malraux, Maugham's novel is steeped with Schopenhauer's philosophy, whose ideas of 'will' and 'representation' would deeply influence Nietzsche and a generation of modern writers. I will discuss Maugham's philosophical inquiry into human life in Chapter Four.

Indian religion and philosophy provided Hermann Hesse with a psychological dimension to approach his recurrent theme: the path to be oneself. In 1916, Hesse was experiencing a serious personal crisis (his father passed away, his wife showed signs of a neurological disease, and his three-year-old son was ill with meningitis), coupled with the Great War, leading to the writer's breakdown and a series of psychological treatments with J. B. Lang, a pupil of Carl Jung, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship (Bach 49). The psychoanalytical perspective shaped Hesse's later writing. *Demian* (1919), a novel replete with Jungian symbolism, was his first experiment, tracing the psychological development of a sensitive boy, Emil Sinclair, into a person of full and determined consciousness of himself. This theme is similar to the progression of Philip Carey in Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, but the two writers take different approaches to explore the main character's growth. Hesse creates another mature and independent character called Demian, who takes on the role of friend and mentor to Sinclair, leading him to spiritual growth. This dual-character strategy mimics Hesse's friendship with his psychiatrist and remains evident in Hesse's other novels. In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse divides his autobiographical narrator into two characters: Harry Haller and Hermine (the female version of Hesse's name

Hermann), where Hermine introduces the main character into the 'Magic Theatre', leading him to explore the psychological depth of human beings. In his Buddhism fiction *Siddhartha*, Hesse split the Buddha's name into two characters: Siddhartha and Gotama. In all these dyads, one character struggles to seek spiritual progression, and the other takes on the role of mentor, leading the main character to dive into psychoanalytical exploration. The spiritually mature character is the fulfilled version of the immature one.

Apart from *Siddhartha*, which directly touches on Buddhism, Hesse's other novels also hint at Vedanta philosophy and Hindu mythology. In *Demian*, Sinclair finally liberates himself from Christian morals and recognises 'atman', the Sanskrit word for 'self' or 'soul' in Vedanta (Bach 69). *Siddhartha* follows a similar pattern of spiritual progression, referencing the Buddha's story to explore Hesse's 'inward' penetration of the 'self' (atman). Compared with Hesse, Maugham does not set up dual characters. His autobiographical hero Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage* finds out the meaning of life himself, while Dr Saunders in *The Narrow Corner* and the enigmatic Larry Darrell in *The Razor's Edge* remain spiritually free throughout the fiction. *The Narrow Corner* implicitly alludes to Buddhism, and *The Razor's Edge* has a significant chapter on Advaita Vedanta, which I will argue is at the core of interpreting this novel in Chapter Four. Hesse's reference to India not only serves as an encoded symbol of psychological duality, as evident in his other works, but also constitutes a part of his method of self-exploration.

Among all my selected writers, Pearl S. Buck is the most transnational, having grown up and lived more than thirty years in China. The early experience of being cared for by a Chinese *amah* (nanny) and being educated by a Confucian tutor infused to her writing cross-cultural features and a natural attachment to the Chinese land. For Buck, America is her "motherland" while China is her "fatherland" (Cole and Haddad 71). She recalled the Chinese as kind people: "I have no memory of ever seeing an angry brown face or of hearing a harsh Chinese voice directed toward me in my childhood" (Leong 14–15). In her novels set

in China, Pearl Buck closely observes rural areas and speaks forcefully to the hardworking and down-to-earth Chinese people, with whom she had an intimate connection from childhood. *The Good Earth* presented for the first time the real life of ordinary Chinese people to the Western public (Richards 8), expanding Western knowledge of Chinese people to the goodness of their souls (Hardy xi). O-lan in *The Good Earth* is particularly memorable as she possesses the “primitive power of the earth mother” that wins the love and sympathy of readers worldwide (Ma 89). However, Buck’s depiction of rural China establishes another stereotype of poverty and hardship among the Chinese working-class people. This perspective is still limited as it shows no knowledge of the intellectual movements occurring at that time, as I mentioned in the ‘East as Other’ section. Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* and *On a Chinese Screen* include descriptions of impoverished rural areas and hardworking Chinese people, but his engagement with Chinese history, philosophy, and intellectuals makes Maugham’s China more multi-dimensional and complex than Buck’s.

Buck’s reference to China is a part of her exploration of a “middlebrow mission”,<sup>35</sup> where middlebrow pertains to Buck’s aesthetics and her situatedness in the context of middlebrow studies, and her “mission” is driven by her biographical motivations: using her unique experience “to educate her American readership about China and, simultaneously, to negotiate her own identity as a cultural go-between” (Künnemann 15). In her Nobel Prize lecture, she discussed the difference between Chinese and Western novels, noting that Chinese novels are not seen as a genre of art but as written records of vernacular storytelling. She learned from Chinese novels to take distance from “the grace of art” and to write for the common people, “ugly and imperfect, incomplete even as human beings, and where they come from and where they go cannot be known”, simply because they are people (Buck). Therefore, Buck distances herself from Western highbrow literature and refers to the more down-to-earth ideal of Chinese novels as a model, believing this will be

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<sup>35</sup> See Vanessa Künnemann, *Middlebrow Mission: Pearl S. Buck's American China*. Transcript, 2015.

“illuminating for the novels of the West” (Buck). Despite Buck’s limited contact with China through the rural areas and lower-class people, her understanding of Chinese people and Chinese novels serve as a reference to her own ideal of middlebrow writing.

In January 1938, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood arrived in China under Faber & Faber’s commission to write a travel book in an Asian country. It was a time when China was being torn apart by the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and they did not leave the country until June that year. The product of this travel was *Journey to a War*, which consists of six opening sonnets, a prose sequence ‘Travel Diary’ of their day-to-day encounters in China, a ‘Picture Commentary’ of sixty-five photos, and ‘In Time of War: A Sonnet Sequence with a Verse Commentary’. Isherwood contributed to the prose and the photograph of Auden; the rest of this book was completed by Auden. In structure, *Journey to a War* as a collage of fragmentary sections was sometimes criticised for its “weak narrativity” and repetition of chronological records (Coats 170). However, its discontinuous form and repetitive mosaic constitute a larger metaphor for a disintegrating country at war and provide multiple perspectives for observation – visual, poetic, or prosaic – that complement one another. Its structure creates a sense of disharmony brought by human violence, similar to the Great War poets represented by Wilfred Owen during the First World War. Auden and Isherwood’s China, disintegrating by virtue of the Sino-Japanese War, becomes a reference to its Western counterpart: Spain in its Civil War and Germany in the Second World War.

Recent studies by Stuart Christie and Hugh Haughton have examined the transformative effect of *Journey to a War* on Auden and Isherwood. Douglas Brown, in his PhD thesis, has identified this book as a key moment in the definition of Auden’s poetics and rhetoric, his exploration of the problem of freedom, and in Isherwood’s attentiveness to the political situation of modern homosexuals (Brown v). War shaped much of Auden’s poetry (Kendall 111): apart from his poetry sequence ‘Sonnets from China’ (later version of ‘In

Time of War'), there are war poems like 'Spain 1937' and 'September 1, 1939'. The journey to China might have forever changed Auden's poetry (Brown 7) and foreshadowed Isherwood's religious reorientation. On January 19, 1939, the anniversary of their Chinese journey, Auden and Isherwood emigrated to America probably as a response to a seemingly incurable European crisis. Auden's poetry was significantly influenced by E. M. Forster in the matter of English restraint (Christie 1578). The opening poem of *Journey to a War* is dedicated to Forster, and two photos depicting the shattered condition of Chinese people are entitled 'La Condition Humaine', a tribute to the title of Malraux's novel (Auden and Isherwood 255). Auden and Isherwood's China offers a pivotal moment for the two writers to reconsider European traditions and relocate themselves, or, in a broader sense, constitutes a "literary exercise in Western self-understanding and self-transformation" (Brown 10). Similar to Maugham, Auden and Isherwood had been struggling with their homosexual British identity. In an interview in 1977, Isherwood said, "I think of myself as a foreigner" (Terkel 167). *Journey to a War* was heavily influenced by Maugham, as Auden and Isherwood were repeatedly reminded of "Maugham stories" and the "Maugham figure" in China (Terkel 178).

After the publication of *Journey to a War*, Auden continued writing and teaching poetry, while Isherwood devoted himself to Hinduism through involvement at a Hindu meditation centre in California, where he resided from 1943 for much of the next four decades. Isherwood's memoir *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980) recalls this experience at the centre with a focus on his relationship with the guru, his Swami, a humorous and affectionate Indian monk named Prabhavananda (Murray 270). During the four decades in the meditation centre, Isherwood wrote a few screenplays to promote his yogic practice before serving as the editor and major contributor for *Vedanta and the West*, the meditation centre's bimonthly magazine and the book *Vedanta for the Western World* (1948). He also produced a translation of *Bhagavad Gita* in 1944. Maugham visited Isherwood's studio in

Hollywood Hills on 14 January 1941. Together with Gerald Heard, they had long conversations about the *Upanishads* and the Hindu scriptures, about Vedanta and the eighth-to-ninth century philosopher Shankara<sup>36</sup> (Hastings 517; Isherwood *Diaries* 142). In their correspondence in 1943, Isherwood helped Maugham translate the verse from *Katha Upanishad* which later became the epigraph of *The Razor's Edge*. Auden expressed ambivalence at Isherwood's conversion, fearing that Hinduism might pose a threat to their friendship, yet ironically Auden's later writing pre-emptively criticises readers for dismissing non-European religions with specific reference to Hinduism (Murray 277). *Journey to a War* contains Auden and Isherwood's reflections on the wartime Western crisis. Following this publication, Auden still wrote poetry and Isherwood devoted himself to religious writing. Unlike either of them, Maugham experimented with Chinese and Indian philosophy in his most influential literary works.

This section has reviewed texts by Kafka, Forster, Malraux, Hermann Hesse, Pearl Buck, Auden, and Isherwood in order to examine the different referential effects of the East in their literary careers and works. Except for Kafka, all the writers treated in this section have visited the East and their depictions are relatively accurate. This section exemplifies modern writers' attempt to take a cross-cultural perspective to include the East into larger conceptions of modern narrative from a close, sympathetic, non-biased distance, rather than conforming to a Eurocentric ideology of 'East as Other'. The East then becomes a mirror of Western civilisation and a symbol of the unknown, the gnomic, the inscrutable, the spiritual quest, down-to earth diligence, and revolutionary spirit, signifying different things for each of the authors. Maugham's engagement with the East is more complicated because he does not view the East from one single perspective. In the next section, the East will be proposed

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<sup>36</sup> I follow Max Muller's commentary that he was born in 788 A.D. and died in 820 A.D. Chapter Four will introduce more about Maugham's study of Shankara's philosophy.

as a transformative force that impacts Western thinking and reshapes modern literature and poetics, which I designate as ‘East as Method’.

### **East as Method, Beyond Form**

Despite often limited opportunity for cultural interaction, the ‘East as Reference’ model has enabled Western writers to critically reflect on their own civilisation, significantly challenging the ‘East as Other’ narrative and Eurocentric ideology. This section introduces the final model in my threefold methodology, ‘East as Method’: the East is not merely a parallel reference to the Western counterpart but a reservoir of intellectual, philosophical, and aesthetic resources that have incubated modernist poetry and cultivated modern poetics. Considering my historical methodology of interlinked East and West, which sustains this thesis, I will review the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century heritage of ‘East as Method’ in Western Europe and North America before entering the modernist terrain of the twentieth century.

This section starts with the Eastern influence on the formation of Romanticism, received in the forms of Chinese gardening, Arabic tales, and Indian philosophy. Chinese gardening inspires an aesthetical appreciation for ‘sharawadgi’ as a revolt against the neoclassical standards of the eighteenth century.<sup>37</sup> At around the same time, *The Arabian Nights* was translated into English and inspired the Romantic imagination in poetry and fiction<sup>38</sup>. In the nineteenth century, the translation and introduction of *The Upanishads* impacted European ways of conceptualising the self and the world. Particularly, Indian thought was absorbed into Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which significantly shook the rational pillars of European philosophy and paved the way for modernist literature. Then, I

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<sup>37</sup> See Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange 1760–1840*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> See Peter L. Caracciolo, *The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of the Thousand and One Nights into British Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1988.

will introduce New England transcendentalists' poetic exploration and inheritance from Asia. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman absorbed Indian Vedantic philosophy and noticed the pictographic nature of Chinese written characters and the use of natural imagery in ancient Chinese poetry. Although limitations exist in their understanding of Eastern philosophy (for example, Emerson confuses Hinduism with Buddhism, and Confucianism with Neo-Confucianism), these aesthetic and philosophical contemplations of Asian elements provide different 'Methods' to develop Western aesthetics, literature, and philosophy. Such approaches continued with modernist experiments of poetry in the twentieth century.

This section, 'East as Method', proposes a reflexive approach that critically evaluates Western literary, aesthetic, and philosophical traditions, suggesting the transformative effect of non-European elements on Western literature and art in general. Four twentieth-century figures are selected in terms of poetry and poetics: Ernest Fenollosa's essay on Chinese written characters, Ezra Pound's poetic experiments in *Cathay*, Victor Segalen's invention of stèles poetry, and I. A. Richards's absorption of Confucian ideas of equilibrium and harmony (中庸 *zhongyong*/Chung Yung) in his New Criticism. These literary critics/writers recognised the intellectual and aesthetic East and integrated it into their own poetry or poetics. For these authors, the East, especially China, is not only an ambivalent cultural signifier but manifests a revolutionary force that reshapes the literary tradition and inspires new ways of artistic representation. This model, which I name 'East as Method', is fundamentally different from 'East as Other' and 'East as Reference' because of its aesthetic appreciation of the East and its role in reconceptualizing Western art.

My earliest example of 'East as Method' dates to Sir William Temple's appreciation of Chinese gardening's features as "ungeometrical, irregular, highly diversified, without obvious plan" (Lovejoy 13) in the late seventeenth century, which brought inspiration for British architectural styles and led to certain features of Romantic revolt against

Neoclassical geometrical standards. Temple was the first Englishman to discuss Chinese gardening and showed tremendous “English enthusiasm about the Chinese” (Zhongshu Qian 111). Temple’s essay ‘Upon the Gardens of Epicurus, or Of Gardening’, written in 1685 and published in 1692, observes the Chinese aesthetics of ‘irregularity’ and enriches the English language with a strange word ‘sharawadgi’. Temple confessed to having heard this word about gardening from people who have lived much among the Chinese (Zhongshu Qian 112). In his Oxford dissertation, Qian Zhongshu traces the Chinese etymology of ‘sharawadgi’: *san lan* (散亂 *san luan*) meaning “scattered and disorderly” or *su lo* (疏落 *shu luo*) meaning “widely scattered and disorderly” and *wai chi* (位置 *wei zhi*) meaning “position and arrangement” – altogether, in short, “space tastefully enlivened by disorder” (117). After Temple, eighteenth-century English poets, essayists, and novelists such as Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, and Horace Walpole, continued to mention ‘sharawadgi’ in their works, emphasising the preference for the natural appearance of asymmetry and irregularity (Kitson 182). Particularly, Addison added one feature to the aesthetic qualities of Chinese gardens not explicitly mentioned in Temple’s essay: Chinese gardeners sought and achieved the imitation of “natural wildness” (Lovejoy 13). If we say that Temple’s invention of ‘sharawadgi’ bears a parallel to his contemporaries’ ‘East as Reference’ tendency, then the later development of this notion and the building of Anglo-Chinese gardens in the eighteenth century becomes a ‘Method’ for developing English aesthetics, culminating in the appreciation for nature in Romanticism. The most notable architectural experiment is Sir William Chambers’s construction of Kew Gardens in 1763.

In his *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772), Chambers praises Chinese gardeners as “not only Botanists, but also Painters and Philosophers” (cited in Yu Liu “Chinese Garden” 674). The aesthetics embodied in the Kew Gardens has illustrated Temple’s notion of ‘sharawadgi’ and the central theme in Chambers’ *Dissertation*: “harmony is achieved through the unharmonious” (Hsai 247). Kew Gardens features a ten-storey, 160-foot high

Chinese Pagoda (Figure 5), the two-storey House of Confucius, miniature hills, artificial rocks, winding pathways, cascades, a Mosque, an Alhambra, a Roman Triumphal Arch, and a Gothic Cathedral. All these culturally incompatible elements were arranged harmoniously through the naturalistic disposition of water, plants, and buildings – a result from Chambers’s extensive notes of observing Chinese artisans during his two visits in China when he worked for the Swedish East India Company in 1744 and 1748, and before that, his reading of French Jesuit Jean-Denis Attiret’s account of Yuan-Ming-Yuan (Yu Liu “Chinese Garden” 685). Kew Gardens, a popular ‘folly’ of its age, was a medley of cultural signifiers, and maintains its reputation as a renowned royal botanic garden, featuring a variety of worldwide plants as a result of plant exchanges between Britain and its Eastern trading posts (Czennia 99). Kew Gardens may be representative of Anglo-Chinese gardens, but the eighteenth century also witnessed the emergence of Indianised architecture such as the Sezincote House in Gloucestershire (Figure 6) and the Royal Pavilion in Brighton.



Figure 5. The Great Pagoda in Kew Gardens<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> From the Kew Gardens website: ‘Great Pagoda RBG Kew’ <https://www.kew.org/kew-gardens/whats-in-the-gardens/the-great-pagoda>, accessed 3 March 2025.



Figure 6. The Sezincote House in Gloucestershire<sup>40</sup>

In his seminal essay, ‘The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism’ (1933), Arthur Lovejoy argues that the Chinese aesthetics of *sharawadgi* was “introduced in eighteenth-century England as a reaction to neo-classical desiderata of regularity and formality” (Kitson 182). It was received as a method to revolt against neo-classical formalism, leading to a new appreciation of nature and culminating in a form of “Romanticism” (Lovejoy 20). The Romantic admiration for nature and “gradual conscious revolt against neo-classical standards” (Lovejoy 20) first took place in the arts of gardening and architecture on a considerable scale and later expanded to literature and other arts. The view of Chinese gardening as “a force leading towards Romanticism” (Hsai 249) provides an aesthetic method to revolt against neo-classical traditions, rather than the general taste of *Chinoiserie*, a term denoting early European interest in and interpretations of Chinese arts popular in the eighteenth century. *Chinoiserie* is, in fact, a sort of the ‘East as Other’ model of distant observation, “lacking a realistic understanding and actual contact with that

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<sup>40</sup> From the Sezincote website: ‘House & Garden’ <https://www.sezincote.co.uk/house-and-garden>, accessed 3 March 2025.

country” and was often mixed with other styles such as Rococo and Gothicism that caught public attention at that time (Hsai 250). Recent studies that locate and examine aspects of Romantic writing about nature and its Asian influence have been acknowledged and promoted to the forefront of Romantic Studies scholarship, notably through Peter J. Kitson’s *Forging Romantic China* (2013).

Contemporaneously with early Anglo-Chinese gardens, the translation into English of *The Arabian Nights* in 1704 also helped shape the development of Western literature (Caracciolo “The House of Fiction and Le Jardin Anglo-Chinois” 200; Vassallo 78). The Arabesque allusions are significantly detectable in Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) in the Arabic story-cycle narrative and parallel plots with the tale of the Hunchback (Caracciolo “The House of Fiction and Le Jardin Anglo-Chinois” 203). *The Arabian Nights* was also “massively influential” for Romantic poets such as S. T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth (Kitson 197). Coleridge’s precocious reading of *The Arabian Nights* at the age of six and his obsession with *jinnii* (a kind of spiritual creature in Arabic mythology) foregrounded his romantic imaginations, as Coleridge acknowledged in one of his letters, “his ‘mind had been habituated to the Vast” (Vassallo 81, italic original). His poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) depicts a voyage away from “a world of harmony and conviviality” into “the supernatural and fantastic” (Vassallo 81–82). Compared with Coleridge’s gorgeous imagination and grand voyage, Wordsworth’s reference to the East in *The Prelude* bears more personal tints, negotiating a way to liberate himself from his trauma and painful memories. In Book Five, through descriptions of an Arab, “Wordsworth imagines and dissociates from himself” (Onorato 374). The Arab becomes the embodiment of Wordsworth’s past self (whose mother died when he was eight) and the Dreaming Man embodies his present self who distances himself from the Arab, or Wordsworth’s childhood trauma (Onorato 377).

Considering the close involvement of Wordsworth's family with the China trade, Kitson suggests that China can be read as Wordsworth's "spiritual autobiography" (192). In Book Eight, Wordsworth's depiction of the Chinese imperial garden *Wanshu Yuan* in Chengde (then known as Jehol or Rehe) as an anti-paradise, an antithesis to the Lake District, embodies the deep trauma of the death of Wordsworth's brother John in February 1805, which spurred Wordsworth to complete the 1805 version of *The Prelude* (Kitson 201). John was associated with commercial activities in the China trade. These biographical reading strategies consider the East as a significant part of the writer's life experiences, rather than follow the historicist negative 'East as Other' model. As Kitson puts "China at the very heart of Wordsworth's creative endeavor" (200), I will use the same strategy in reading Maugham: the East becomes a 'Method' for the writer to distance the writing subject from his past and engage with poetic or fictional license.

In the early nineteenth century, Indian thought was introduced to the West and helped formulate new ways of conceptualizing the self and the world. The publication of a Latin translation of fifty *Upanishads* (1801-02) was a "watershed" that gave Europeans new appreciation for the depth and range of Indian thought (Cross "Upanishads" 128). Arthur Schopenhauer was among the first Europeans to demonstrate familiarity with the *Upanishads* and incorporated Hinduism and Buddhism in his philosophy of "will" and "representation", which would inspire a long list of later philosophers and literary writers, including Friedrich Nietzsche, W. B. Yeats, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Samuel Beckett (Cross *Schopenhauer's Encounter*), and Somerset Maugham, whose personal and literary connections with Schopenhauer and Indian philosophy will be developed in Chapter Four. New England transcendental poets also absorbed Indian thought in their exploration of American Romanticism: the East becomes a method to help Americans to find a way of being 'American' (Weir 13). For example, the emerging awareness of Indian works ran parallel with Unitarian theologians in spiritual matters and supported them against their

Congregationalist neighbours (Weir 11, 37). This line of reading runs through Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman to Ezra Pound's fascination with Confucianism and Gary Snyder's Zen Buddhism, as well as to other examples of post-1960s and contemporary American literature. The "political, spiritual, or aesthetic" East that Americans experience themselves, instead of trying to overcome, is theorised by David Weir as the "American Orient" (Weir 13). The Whitman–Fenollosa–Pound–Snyder genealogy and their East–West alliances continue in contemporary Asian American literature: "the major poetic instigators of American Orientalism construct phantom bridges over the material connections that bind East Asia to the United States" (Park 16).

Chinese influence, earlier than Indian influence, is prominent in New England transcendentalists' works and finds parallel with the pictographic nature of the Chinese written character observed by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound. While studies have shown the Confucian and Indian inheritance in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Yoshio Takanashi's *Emerson and Neo-Confucianism* (2014) demonstrates that Emerson's thoughts are closer to Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism in terms of metaphysics, cosmologies, ethics, laws, and ways of self-realisation (6). Although Emerson did not distinguish Confucianism from Neo-Confucianism, this Oriental heritage was passed on to Pound. Emerson and Thoreau collaborated on Confucian texts. While Thoreau referred to the Confucian senses of the balanced 'Mean' and 'virtue' in *Walden*, Emerson noticed the pastoral poetics of Chinese written language. His citation of such imagery as sun, rain, wood, stone, moon, river, and mountain all happen to belong to the group of words that were commonly used to suggest the pictographic nature of Chinese writing (Byron 37).

Through Fenollosa and Pound, the Chinese written character becomes a dynamic method that reinvigorates English language and poetry. On September 29, 1913, in London, Mrs Mary Fenollosa entrusted Ezra Pound with the late Ernest Fenollosa's sixteen notebooks containing translations of Chinese poetry, notes on Noh drama and lectures on

Chinese poetics, including the 1906 final draft of 'The Chinese Written Character'. Since 1909, during his British Museum years, Pound had already been influenced by Laurence Binyon's aesthetic appreciation for Japanese and Chinese art and had formed his maturing Imagist-Vorticist theory that embodies his ideal of motion-in-stasis in poetry writing ('In a Station of the Metro' was published in April 1913). In his essay 'Vorticism' (1914), Pound defines the Image as "itself the speech" and a Vortex "from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing" (Pound "Vorticism"). Fenollosa's essay "so neatly corresponds" (Cai 195) with Pound's observations on Japanese and Chinese art and his revolutionary ideas and practice on Modernist poetry. Pound's editing and publication of Ernest Fenollosa's 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry' in 1918 and 1936 is considered one of the most important critical texts in the genealogy of Anglo-American modernist ideography.

In his foreword to Fenollosa's essay, Pound credited Fenollosa as the "forerunner" who led Eastern motives and principles into Western modernist painting and poetry (41). Fenollosa saw the dynamic force implied in the metaphorical meaning of Chinese written characters, which would complement the static nature of alphabetic languages. According to Fenollosa, Chinese written characters are not arbitrary symbols but "a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (45). They reveal the "visible nature" (Bush *Ideographic Modernism* 33) of things instantly at the time of being read and altogether form a continuous moving picture. With this kinetic characteristic of its language, Chinese poetry has an advantage of presenting a combination of concreteness as well as movement. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and the mobility of sounds (Fenollosa and Pound 45). Fenollosa's examples illustrate that the nouns in Chinese written language rely on the dynamic interaction of different signs: for example, east (東) is the sun (日) tangled in the branches of the tree (木); spring (春) is the sun underlying the bursting forth of plants (46). Therefore, the Chinese nouns perform actions. For Fenollosa, Chinese characters were

invented as shorthand imitation of nature, unlike English words that were invented to follow grammatical rules: the Chinese verbs are “transitive or intransitive at pleasure” (49) and a written character is flexible in terms of its part of speech – a character could be a noun, verb, or adjective at once and at all times (51). This intrinsic flexible and pictographic feature of Chinese written language provides new thinking and ideographic ways to rejuvenate Western poetry.

Below is one of Pound and Fenollosa’s classical examples:

人	見	馬
Man	Sees	Horse

In English, we see three words, or three phonetic symbols that relate to the signified arbitrarily, but Chinese characters are more than arbitrary signifiers. Fenollosa writes:

The Chinese method follows natural suggestion. First stands the man on his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs. (Fenollosa and Pound 45)

Fenollosa makes a basic mistake here. His generalisation misleads the readers to believe all the Chinese written characters are pictographic or ideographic, while neglecting the word-making method of observing its phonetic nature (*xingsheng*) which comprises 80 percent of the Chinese characters (Zhaoming Qian 145). Nevertheless, Fenollosa’s aesthetic appreciation of the dynamic force in Chinese written characters and emphasis of ‘natural suggestion’ significantly inspires Western poets to rethink language and poetry. Fenollosa and Pound’s influence extends to French poetry such as that of Paul Claudel,<sup>41</sup> for example, in his experimental use of Chinese characters and aesthetics of movement.

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<sup>41</sup> See Ryan Johnson, “An Eternal Dance”: Paul Claudel, Japan, and Thermodynamics.” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2022, pp. 265–82, doi:10.1353/mod.2022.0008 and Chapter One of Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

In light of Fenollosa's observation of the pictographic nature of Chinese written characters, Pound's *Cathay* (1915) includes fifteen 'translations' of classical Chinese poems, which, as T. S. Eliot remarks, are actually Pound's invention or rewriting of Chinese poetry. *Cathay* marks the starting point of Pound's "ideogrammatic method" or "Chinese syntax" (Yip *Cathay* 7), developed on the basis of super-position in his 'Metro' poem and lavishly employed later in the *Cantos*. Pound's 'translations' in *Cathay* showed variable fidelity to the original Chinese poems; nor could they fit within the traditions of English poetry, thus making "a substantial break from traditional Anglo-American poetics and previous translations of Chinese" (Hayot 13). For Pound, translation is merely a form to bridge East and West and to fulfill his Imagist-Vorticist aesthetics. The formal and poetic innovation in *Cathay* rescues English poetry from the cliché of pictorialism and infuses vitality into the genre of poetry through the imitation of Chinese syntax and ideographical presentation of images.

Contemporaneous with Fenollosa's essay, Victor Segalen found formal innovation in the Chinese stele to develop his aesthetics of diversity, characterised by the subject's intense sensation caused by a distanced appreciation of exotic objects. For Segalen, China becomes a method in his exoticism, "a means of developing a sense of infinite diversity" (Reid 115). Earlier in *Essai sur L'Exotisme* (1908), Segalen expressed his lifelong pursuit of exoticism as both a sort of aesthetics and a way of living: "ce n'est point comme unique ressort d'esthétique, mais comme la Loi fondamentale de l'intensité de la Sensation, de l'exaltation du Sentir; donc de vivre"<sup>42</sup> (cited in Reid 115). From 1909 to 1913, Segalen resided in Beijing, witnessing the twilight of the Qing Dynasty and the ensuing social movements. During this period, Segalen found in Chinese stone inscriptions a specific charm of impersonal coolness, which withstands historical turbulence, and sensed its aesthetic form

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<sup>42</sup> My translation: 'it is not as the only spring of aesthetics, but as the fundamental Law of the intensity of Sensation, of the exaltation of Feeling; so to live'.

would make new poetry. He copied the inscriptions by stone-rubbing and put them on the upper right corner of pages, and the rest of the pages were his French prose poems as both annotation to and rewriting of the original inscriptions (Figure 7).

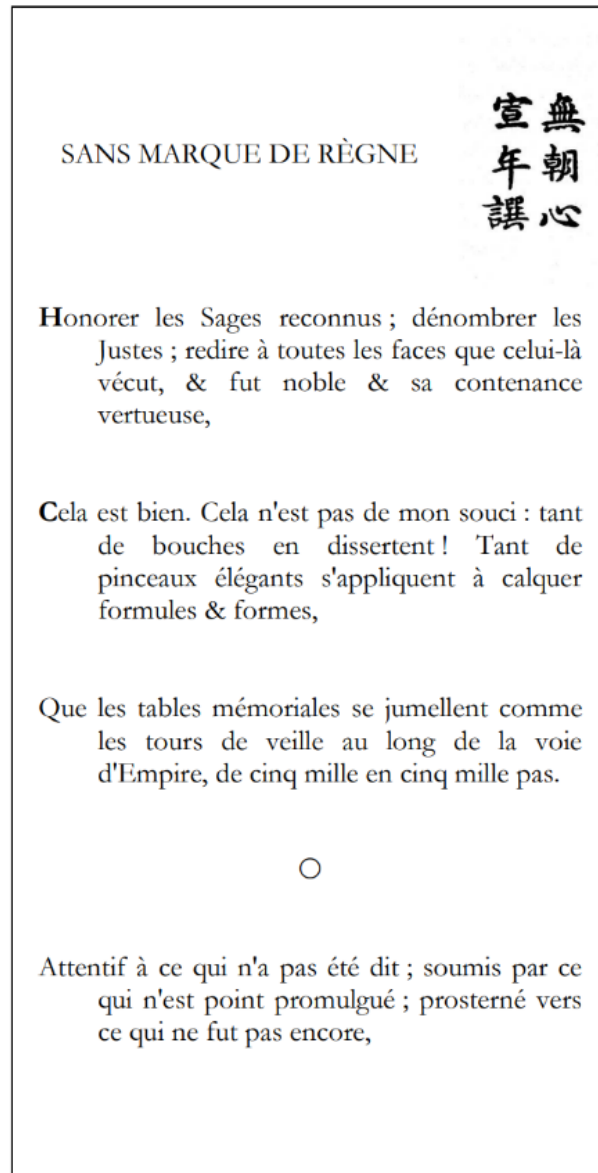


Figure 7. Segalen's first poem in *Stèles*<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> From Victor Segalen, *Stèles*. Edited by Christopher Bush and Timothy Billings, Wesleyan University Press, 2007.

Segalen's poetry collection *Stèles*, privately published in Beijing in 1912, contains a series of wry, intriguing, and at times haunting prose poems that are presented like translations of Chinese 'steles'. The black frame on each page mimics the physical space of steles and the hanging indentation imitates *pingque*, a traditional composition of Chinese official documents to pay homage to the emperor, ancestors and heaven (Postel and Guo 146). The book was printed in accordion folds and the size of pages follows the 1:2.8 miniature of the Nestorian Monument in Xi'an, which, as I mentioned in this chapter's introductory section, is a historical stele, being the earliest evidence of Syriac-Chinese religious contact. *Stèles* exhibits Segalen's effort to promote his aesthetic ideal of diversity – "a surprisingly contemporary-sounding call for an anticolonial, even antiglobalization aesthetic that would preserve the alterity of the Other" (Bush *Ideographic Modernism* 75). The ideographs and Francophone texts *read* together, suggesting "important general lessons about modernist uses of China as a source of formal innovation" (Bush *Ideographic Modernism* 72). Similar to Pound's Chinese poems in *Cathay*, Segalen's stele poems are inventive mistranslations or rewriting of the ancient Chinese texts according to Chinese stele customs. These historical references to China embody Segalen's aesthetical ideal of diversity and his effort in innovating poetic forms.

I will conclude this section with the Confucian aesthetics of I. A. Richards, the leading figure of New Criticism and thus at the centre of modern literary studies. This example follows the Chinese intellectual movements and Westernised education in China in the early twentieth century, as mentioned earlier in the 'East as Other' section. Between 1929 and 1930, Richards taught Western literature and literary criticism at Tsinghua University. From 1936 to 1938, he returned to politically turbulent China to promote his Basic English program. Before his visit to China, Richards was influenced by Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and Bertrand Russell at Cambridge who admired traditional Chinese values and were disturbed by China's rush to modernisation and radical departure from its

traditions (Songlin Wang 67). Richards had close intellectual connections with Chinese scholars, such as Xu Zhimo in Cambridge and Wu Mi in Tsinghua.<sup>44</sup> Richards's book, *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1920), opens with two calligraphic Chinese characters, *Chung* (equilibrium, 中) and *Yung* (harmony, 庸) written by Xu Zhimo, a pioneering intellectual and poet of the Crescent Moon group (mentioned previously in this chapter), who was then a student at King's College, Cambridge (Songlin Wang 72). The two Chinese characters follow a citation from *Chung Yung* (Figure 8), borrowing the essence of Confucian ideas of harmony and equilibrium to elaborate Richards's aesthetic concept of synaesthesia – a state of mind where various impulses and sensations are harmoniously integrated (Songlin Wang 73). In his later book, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1923), Richards developed the aesthetic idea of synaesthesia into a literary criterion that values 'poetry of the inclusion' to accommodate a variety of opposite impulses, which would form the concept of literary tension for the New Critics.

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<sup>44</sup> See Songlin Wang, "I. A. Richards and Wu Mi: Basic English, Vernacular Chinese, and Chung Yung." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2012, pp. 66–81, doi:10.1093/camqtly/bfr044.

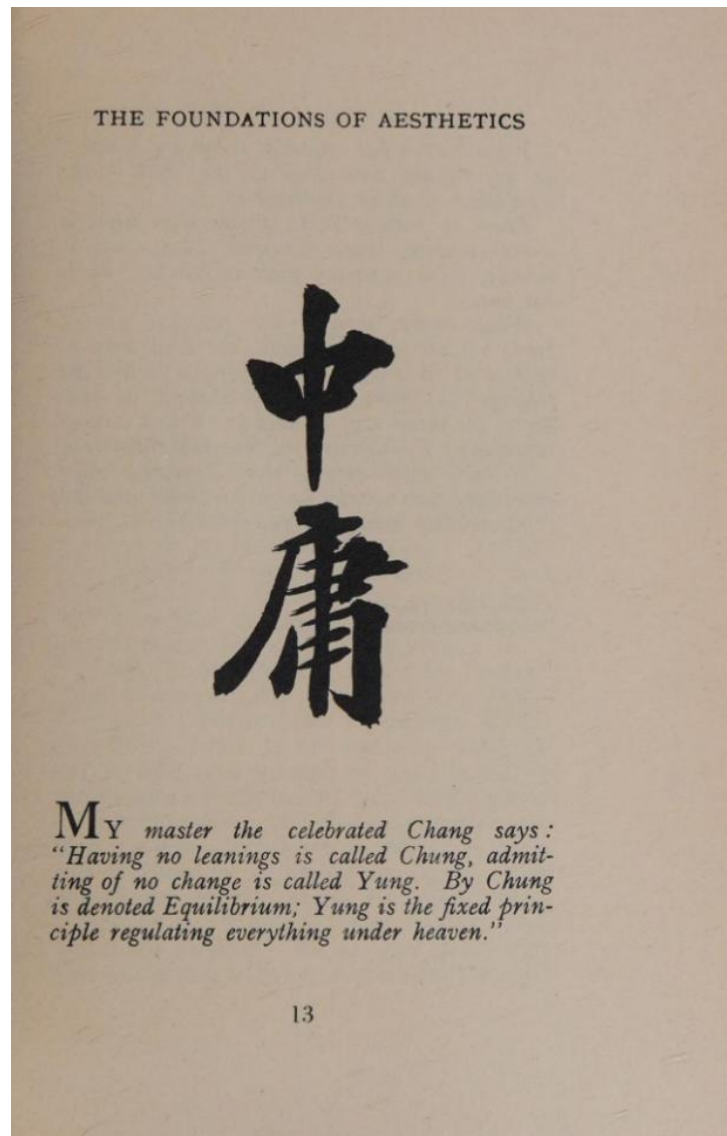


Figure 8. The opening page of I. A. Richards's *The Foundations of Aesthetics*<sup>45</sup>

During his visiting professorship at Tsinghua University, Richards was committed to the study of Mencius with the help of his Chinese colleagues. The result of this study is *Mencius on the Mind* (1932), “at once a demonstration of his research and a statement that emphasizes the importance of bringing into direct contact cultures that hitherto have been separated” (Q. S. Tong 333). In contrast with some Chinese intellectuals’ radical tendency to cut off from their cultural roots, Richards believes that China, with its ancient heritage, was

<sup>45</sup> From I. A. Richards et al., *The Foundations of Aesthetics*. Second ed., Lear Publishers, 1925.

the ideal complement to the West (Russo 405). *Mencius on the Mind* continued Richards's concept of 'multiple definition' formulated in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), with a vision that the multiplicity of meaning "exhibits the ramifications of an underlying totality of truth that can be understood only with a recognition of its formal diversity in the first place" (Q. S. Tong 334). Chinese philosophy by Confucius and Mencius becomes Richards's method to embrace diversity and realise his ideal of cultural universality. This effort to bridge different cultures can be also seen in Richards's promotion of Basic English, an 850-word simplified version of the language, initiated by Richards's close friend Charles Kay Ogden with an ideal to universalise English language in the world (Russo 397). Richards was devoted to designing pedagogy and promoting Basic English in China. In 1936, he established the Orthological Institute of China and experimented with this idea in 1937 and 1938. Although his relentless Basic English mission in China failed, it is remembered as Richards's Confucian method to advocate humanism and cultural pluralism against the historical turbulence of the Sino-Japanese War and Chinese intellectuals' self-othering tendency.

This section establishes the 'East as Method' approach by elucidating the significance of Eastern elements in the formation of modern Western aesthetics. I have reviewed ways that Western intellectuals observe the East and consciously incorporate Eastern aesthetics into their experimental methods of developing Romanticism and Modernism. My twentieth-century examples, Fenollosa, Pound, Segalen, and Richards, did not simply consider China as a colonial 'Other' or a referential object, but made significant cross-cultural effort to bridge East and West through their modernist experimentation and poetic advocacy. The East, then, becomes an inherent and transformative component of Western art, or, an aesthetic method that has informed Western art.

### **Conclusion: East as Modernist Method**

In his groundbreaking work, *Configuration of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism* (2001), Zong-qi Cai proposes three models – intracultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural perspectives – “to address specific deficiencies in various comparative methods and to counter the baneful influence of Orientalist and Occidental discourses” in comparative studies of Western and Chinese poetics (239). The intracultural perspective endeavours to distinguish each poetics as largely “a self-contained system rooted in its own intellectual and cultural traditions” (Cai 240), without which each poetics would be disengaged from its origin and put in a cultural vacuum. The “cross-cultural” perspective helps overcome the polemics of similitude and the polemics of difference and strives to be “crossing deeply entrenched cultural biases separating the West and China” (Cai 247). The “transcultural” perspective seeks to transcend the limitations and prejudices of any single tradition or culture, establishing a broad transcultural space where “similarities and differences can be discussed without privileging, overtly or covertly, one tradition over another” (Cai 253).

Cai concludes his book with a diagrammatic revision of Wai-lam Yip’s cross-cultural diagram of ‘Cultural convergences and divergences’ (Figure 9). Yip maintains that “we must not apply all the structuring characteristics of circle A onto circle B or vice versa” (cited in Cai 248). Yip emphasises equality as the basis of any truly cross-cultural dialogue by drawing two symmetrical circles, same in their sizes and proportion of the shaded area. Based on Yip’s diagram, Cai adds one circle to propose his transcultural perspective (Figure 10): “The new circle D encompasses both the intracultural (A and B) and ‘cross-cultural’ (A, B, and C combined) perspectives” (Cai 250). Cai draws these circles in dotted rather than solid lines with an idealistic vision that the open field of comparative studies “inspires, sustains, and guides our efforts to overcome all cultural bias and stereotypes and better understand our common humanity” (255).

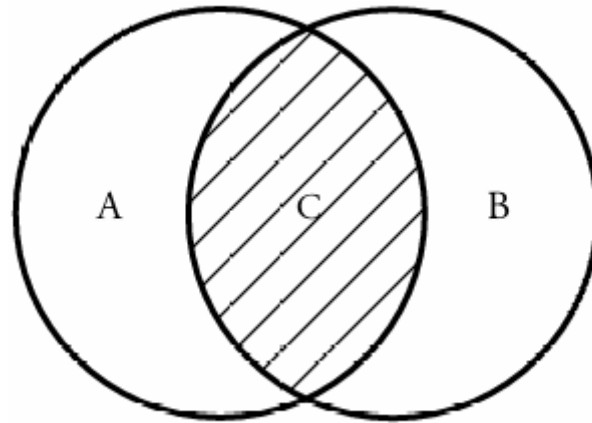


Figure 9. Wai-lam Yip, 'Cultural convergences and divergences'<sup>46</sup>

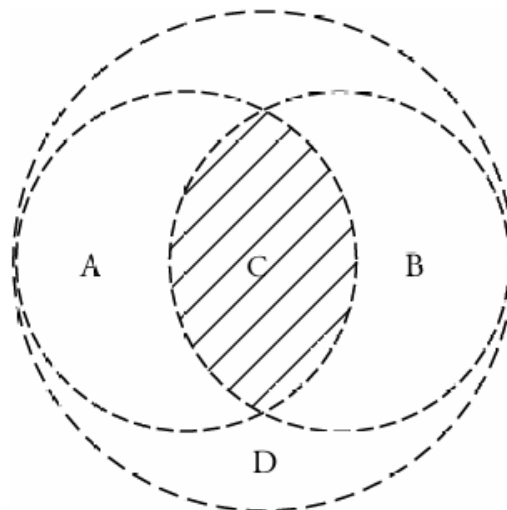


Figure 10. Zong-qi Cai, 'Intracultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural perspectives'<sup>47</sup>

My threefold methodology of 'East as Other', 'East as Reference' and 'East as Method' is largely inspired by Cai's three perspectives. 'East as Other' takes an intracultural perspective to present the double 'othering' process of the East. It starts from the

<sup>46</sup> Figure from Zong-qi Cai, *Configurations of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism*. University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p. 249.

<sup>47</sup> Figure from Zong-qi Cai, *Configurations of Comparative Poetics: Three Perspectives on Western and Chinese Literary Criticism*. University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p. 250.

stereotyped imagination of China in popular Western literature and films and turns to the Chinese intellectuals' self-othering tendency by radically rejecting traditional values in the May Fourth Movement. 'East as Reference' and 'East as Method' take cross-cultural perspectives. 'East as Reference' exemplifies the increasing attention of Western writers to visit and observe Asian countries. However, the contact between East and West is still limited, and the thematic and formal approaches in their writing are rooted in Western traditions. 'East as Method' proposes the East as a key component of Romanticism and Modernism with substantial aesthetical impact on transforming Western art. The East infuses new vitality and experimental methods into the West. The transcultural perspective sustains this chapter and the whole thesis: the introduction of this chapter sets up the vision that East and West are interlinked and inseparable, or rather, that part of Western civilisation originates in the East.

The methodology established in this chapter can be applied in analysing any writer with a comparative outlook. As mentioned in the 'East as Reference' section, the three models sometimes operate together in one text, and these models may fit in different approaches of literary interpretation. With this methodology, I seek to establish a more comprehensive basis for discussing Maugham's engagement with the East, which somehow is actively reflecting on Western ideology and transforming Eurocentric narrative traditions. I revise Cai's diagram for my thesis (Figure 11): 'East as Other' asymmetrically separates East and West; 'East as Reference' equally places East and West with limited contact; 'East as Method', similar to Wai-lam Yip's cross-cultural diagram, incorporates more intellectual interactions between East and West. I conclude this chapter with a vision on modernism, which develops out of the transnational effort to make something new. It does not, as implied in Eurocentric modernism studies, simply centre on Western texts. The East should be considered as an equal, integral, and significant component of modernism. The East should be an aesthetic and philosophical method for Western intellectuals to

innovate in the Western literary canon. The East has its own modernity and modernism.

The largest circle in my last picture in the following diagram, I believe, should be modernism.

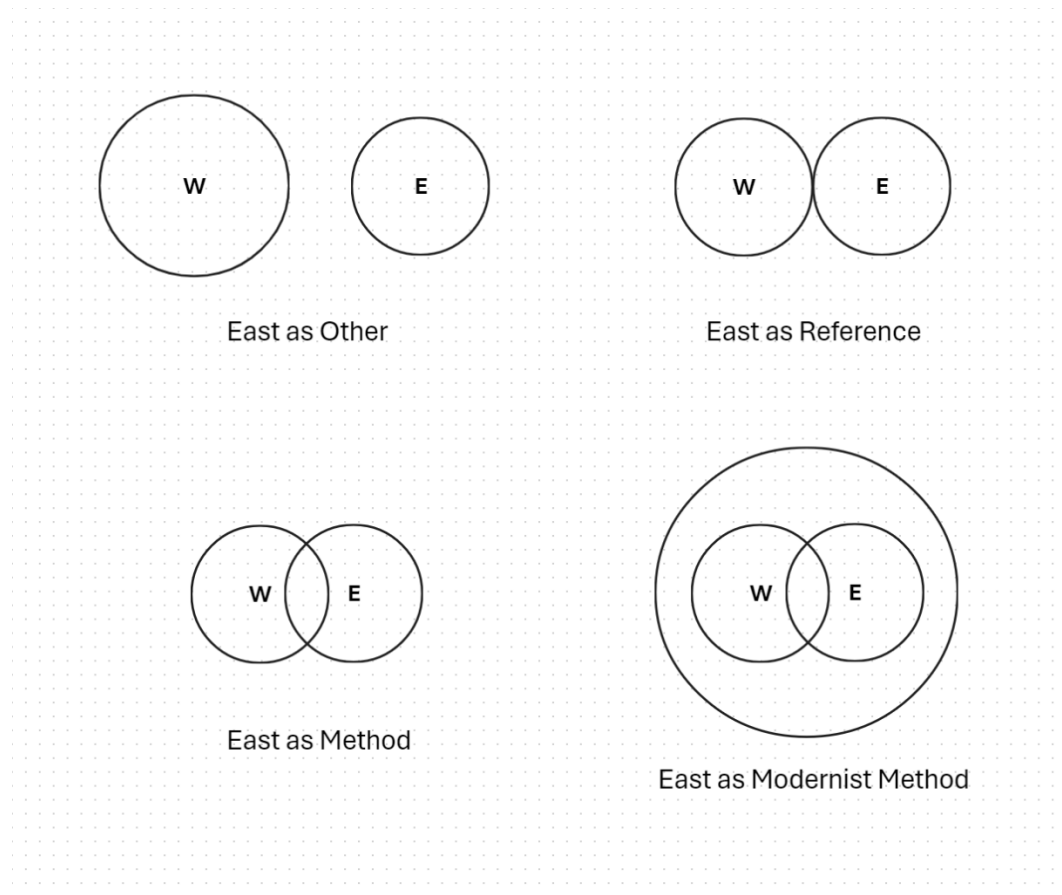


Figure 11. East as Modernist Method<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Figure drawn on Microsoft Whiteboard in March 2025.

## Chapter Two

### The Critique of Englishness in the Formation of Global Modernity

“He wanted to go to the East; and his fancy was rich with pictures of Bangkok and Shanghai, and the ports of Japan: he pictured to himself palm-trees and skies blue and hot, dark-skinned people, pagodas; the scents of the Orient intoxicated his nostrils. His heart beat with passionate desire for the beauty and the strangeness of the world.”

W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*, 1915

“I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning.”

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1916

#### Introduction: Planetary Modernisms

What is modernism? What *was* modernism? Is modernism a self-contradictory, paradoxical notion, “liberating or oppressive, revolutionary or elitist, progressive or regressive” at the same time? (Friedman 32) The canonical concept of modernism comes from the West, from around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I, when “a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space” (Kern 1). The new technology, including “the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane” established the material foundation for cultural transformation, such as “the stream-of-consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity” (Kern 1). The ‘new’ temporality and social transformation brought forth an artistic consciousness of exploring individuals’ spiritual world and experimentation with forms. Such movements are reflected in not only literature, but art, music, film, lifestyle, and people’s way of thinking.

However, this Eurocentric, static, and generalising assumption that modernism originated in the West, namely the Anglo-American and the European world, is problematic. Many questions have been posed and investigated in the last twenty years, with the academic movement of new modernism studies representing a radical break from traditional modernism studies, as modernism did to traditional arts a hundred years ago. Did modernism also take place in non-Western parts of the world, given new experiences of time and space? Did modernism develop unevenly, dissonantly, untimely, in different places? These questions invite a reconsideration of non-Western modernity and modernism in distinct locations with their own social-political backgrounds.

In 'Contexts for Modernism', Christopher Bush exemplifies modernisms in China, Japan, and Korea, ranging from direct emulation to movements found only in that region, to argue that "East Asian modernisms were shaped by profound geopolitical asymmetries with the West" (17), indicating each country's own pace of developing modernism. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's advocacy of a 'temporal, spatial, vertical' (2008) expansion of modernism studies allows for scholarly discussions on the plurality of 'global modernisms', rather than the singular and homogenising form of 'modernism'. Stephen Ross and Allana C. Lindgren's *The Modernist World* (2015) compiles a number of interdisciplinary essays that break through regional confines, uncovering modernisms in the contexts of Asia, the Middle East and the Arab world, Canada, Australia/Oceania and Africa, arguing for the "validity of modernism as a governing term that can invoke all cognate or parallel terms, and that can denote experimentation, critique, and self-conscious demarcation of a break with tradition" (Lindgren and Ross 3). Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms* (2014), incorporating storytelling in her academic style, formally and intellectually challenges the 'old' assumptions of the centre/periphery framework set by Western modernity and modernism. Friedman's conceptualisation of planetary modernisms "is an epistemology, not an ontology" (79). It does not resolve the fundamental questions

engendered by the expansion of modernism studies, but her bold attempts to redefine time and space and to dismantle the institutionalised framework that ‘the West is the centre, the Rest is peripheral’ invite dialogues and debates central to new modernist studies.

This chapter is inspired by these new modernist efforts to reconceptualise time and space in different locations in Maugham’s fiction. Global modernism does not limit itself to a certain time and space, nor does it generalise modernity as a Western phenomenon. Rather, it uncovers an unsynchronised tendency of non-Western locations’ response to different kinds of modernities. The multi-centred, multi-formed, whilst inter-connected modernities did not take place in a causal sequence – for example, not moving from, or brought from the West to the East – but came to rise in their own time and space, altogether forming global modernity. The main locations in this chapter – England, Malaya, China, and Polynesia – respond to global modernity in their own localities, rather than a simple mode of West to East transmissions: declining imperialism in England, belated European communities in the Federated Malay States, China’s May Fourth Movement, and Polynesian refusal to be absorbed by British culture.<sup>49</sup> These modernities did not happen simultaneously: within Europe, when Paris saw the burgeoning Post-Impressionist arts and became the beacon of high modernism, London was still haunted by imperial nostalgia. At the same time, Maugham examines the highly modernised Eastern locations in the 1920s: Hong Kong with banking industries, Singapore and Honolulu full of automobiles. These examples are representative of modernity in Eastern locations, going against traditional models of interpreting Asian modernity as resistance to Western power. Maugham’s characters travel through different modernities, from London to Paris, from England to the Pacific Islands, from the West to the East.

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<sup>49</sup> See short story ‘The Pool’. Maugham’s depiction of Polynesia is among his earliest non-European stories and does not touch Pacific modernism, which is discussed in Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long. *New Oceania: Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific*. Routledge, 2020; and *The Rise of Pacific Literature: Decolonization, Radical Campuses, and Modernism*. Columbia University Press, 2024.

This chapter argues Maugham's modernism functions as a critique of English imperialist ideology, manifested in his increasing consciousness and exploration of global modernity through his routes from Europe to Asia and the Pacific. Such a statement seems surprisingly contrary to the twentieth century's postcolonial studies on Maugham, which tends to label him among the Orientalist writers that simply tell colonisers' stories while neglecting the reality in the East. Admittedly, there are times when Maugham describes the East with naïve romanticisation, mystification, or dehumanisation, similarly to those writers in the 'East as Other' model described in Chapter One. In addition, the main characters in Maugham's Eastern stories are mostly white men, falling into the 'East as Reference' category and leading to criticisms that his Eastern characters are insignificant. Maugham himself claims the reason to be the difficulty to know the people from a different cultural tradition. As he wrote, "It is hard enough for an English writer to know anything about his own countrymen, whom he knows after all not only by observation, but by feeling, habit and knowledge of himself; it is impossible for him to know an American, a Frenchman or a German with anything like the same intimacy" (Ah King xii–xiii). However, Maugham's imperialist critique and resistance to the colonial history, a global extension of English socio-cultural conventions, bears significance to 'East as Method'.

Maugham's engagement with Eastern modernity is a self-reflective, self-critical process, evolving with his travels and knowledge of the locations. His search of the East is built on his critique of Englishness, evident in the beginning of his writing career. Maugham's unpublished novel 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey' (1898–99) voices an acrimonious attack on English identity and nationality, through an American character retained in *Of Human Bondage*. Maugham's early novels, *The Hero* (1901) and *The Explorer* (1903), although with loose plots and melodramatic scenes, directly touch the cruelty of the Boer War and its destructive impact on the soldiers and their families, dissolving the idealised image of British patriotism and heroism. The titles are ironical; the

theme and the main character in *The Hero* highly resonate with Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'The Hero', published a decade after Maugham's novel as a response to the First World War (Fussell and Winter x). These early writings already showcase Maugham's internal critique of British nationalism and imperialist ideology.

Then, the East becomes a 'method' for Maugham to distance from, reflect on, and critique Western culture, and meanwhile, for some characters to appreciate, to grow, to gain freedom. Maugham's East constructs a different location and temporality from Europe, reflected in a time lag on newspapers, separating individual colonisers from their cultural origins and spotlighting their isolated suffering. This method extends Maugham's imperial critique to Eastern modernities. In contrast, some characters, self-reflective like Maugham, become critical of their Western cultural roots and settle down in peace. Although romantic imagination sometimes remains in Maugham's early depiction of the Polynesian environment, the works selected in this chapter reflect Maugham's departure from English traditions, revolutionary in the 1910s–20s, and prepare for his fundamental incorporation of Eastern philosophy in his later novels.

To locate Maugham in the framework of global modernisms in relation to the Asian context in the early twentieth century, I will draw on Friedman's four critical practices of reading the archives of planetary modernisms (76-79): Re-vision, Recovery, Circulation, and Collage. Re-vision, she writes, "is the act of looking again, of defamiliarizing the familiar archive by looking anew through a different lens, asking new questions of 'high modernism'" (Friedman 76). I enter the archive by drawing parallels between Maugham's works and canonical works earlier than, or roughly contemporary to, his writing. The former includes nineteenth-century classics by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, to whom Maugham alluded in parody, and the latter includes Joseph Conrad, whom Maugham partially appreciated and partially criticised, and, more significantly, such 'high modernists' as James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, whose works resonate with *Of Human Bondage* in

the character's transnational artistic pursuit but were published later than or almost simultaneously with Maugham's novel. Such an approach of defamiliarising familiar texts calls for re-visioning the different artistic centres in Europe – Dublin, London, Paris – and their unsymmetrical modernities, anticipating further engagement with Eastern modernism.

The three sections in this chapter roughly relate to Friedman's other three reading practices: Recovery, "the act of digging, creating an archaeology of new archives – other modernities outside the familiar Western ones and thus other forms of creative expressivities"; Circulation, "the archive of mobility, calling for the act of seeing linkages, networks, conjunctures, creolizations, intertextualities, travels, and transplantations connecting modernisms from different parts of the planet"; and Collage, "the archive of radical juxtaposition, the scholar's act of paratactic cutting and pasting" (Friedman 76–77). The first section *recovers* Maugham's radical rejection of English chauvinism and participation in artistic movements in 1890s Paris, creating new archives including *Of Human Bondage* and its earliest, unpublished draft written in 1898–99. The second section examines the *circulation* of Maugham's imperialist critique through colonial sea routes and his metonymy of man and environment, connecting different modernities located in both East and West. The third section *collages* home and not-home, nostalgia and modernity, high-class and low-class, to decentralise the English clubs in colonies and deconstruct the ideas of community, Englishness, Western modernity, imperialism, and essentialism.

These reading strategies overlap and blend in my discussions of Maugham's narrative style, straightforward but by no means as simple as it appears. One of Maugham's often-used symbols is the caged bird, best known for the 'Princess of September' allegory set in a Siamese palace, written in his third phase of Eastern travel in 1924 and published in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1933). The caged bird bears strong symbolism for all kinds of bondage that hinders the natural development of human life. This bird image and Maugham's stylistic emphasis on simplicity immediately resemble Hemingway's short story

‘A Canary for One’, published in 1926, featuring a caged canary symbolising a young lady trapped in her mother’s control and narrow chauvinism. An unexpected linkage is found between Maugham’s canal travel in Siam and Hemingway characters’ train travel in France, between old and new modernist archives, between different modernities in East and West.

This chapter will conclude with a short analysis of Maugham’s strong but seldom noticed influence on George Orwell, specifically Orwell’s first novel *Burmese Days* and essays ‘A Hanging’ and ‘Shooting an Elephant,’ all set in Burma, showing that Maugham’s direct and indirect imperialist critique, along with his style of ‘simplicity, lucidity and euphony’, deep sympathy towards Eastern people, and rich symbolism, have opened a planetary conversation and participated in the formation of new modernism studies.

### **Ungentlemanly Englishman**

In his seminal book *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, Peter Gay identifies the modernists’ principal villain as “of course, the bourgeoisie” (14). They treated the bourgeois as the “perspiring philistine”, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s terms, incapable of appreciating original creations (Gay 15). The first half of *Of Human Bondage* situates the combat between Philip Carey’s adoptive family, the bourgeois uncle and aunt, and his own artistic pursuit. Mr and Mrs Carey hoped Philip would enter Oxford and become a gentleman, at least a churchman like his uncle, but Philip rejected this idea. He gave up his religion, dropped out of school, spent a year in Germany learning philosophy and several years in Paris learning art, before he returned to England to study medicine. In Germany, Philip came to understand that nationality is contingent, and nothing is superior in being an Englishman. In Paris, he witnessed the blossoming of Post-Impressionist paintings as well as the cruel reality of being an untalented artist. Philip’s rebellious decision “to betray the sacred trinity of family, God, and nation” is no less definitive than Stephen Dedalus’s proud announcement of being an exile, “one of the defining moments of modernism” (Love 21–22). *A Portrait of*

*the Artist as a Young Man* concludes with Stephen's dicta of "silence, exile, cunning" (Joyce 253), his determination to pursue new art in Paris and farewell to his home, fatherland and church; while Maugham's protagonist rejected these national and religious values and exiled himself in Paris in the earlier stage of his life in *Of Human Bondage*.

It may be said that Philip's rebellion is not radical as he gave up art and returned to England in the middle of the book, and what follows are the rather mediocre Mildred chapters. As is known, this novel is autobiographical; it becomes realistic when Maugham himself found out he had no talent for painting although he had a lifelong passion for it. More realistic in the novel is when Philip saw another untalented art student hang herself out of extreme poverty. The Paris chapters reach a crescendo with the art students' eagerness and effort to break the old world and create new arts – in their highbrow discussions, in cafes, in art galleries – but fall into anti-climax with the reality that none of them has the 'cunning' to become a great artist. Evidently, Maugham was conscious of the modernist movements in art at that time, but he was more than conscious of the realistic difficulties in becoming an artist.

Philip's rebellion is still a definitive modernist moment. *Of Human Bondage* opens with an English scene, unlike the author's childhood upbringing in Paris. This makes Philip's rejection of English traditions more radical and significant. The timing is also important: it was published one year before *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and its earliest draft was completed eighteen years earlier. The manuscript of 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey,' housed in the Library of Congress, unsurprisingly paints Maugham's earliest autobiographical character, under the name of Stephen Carey, as having abandoned his religion and realised the contingency of nationality. *Of Human Bondage* is more radical than the 'Stephen Carey' draft, containing rich philosophical reflections on the emptiness of human life, leading the story from concrete reality to an "immaterial and intangible" level (Dora Zhang 10). This novel also involves many transnational episodes in

Germany and France, allowing the character to reflect on his nationality and cultural traditions at a distance.

This section examines Philip Carey's rejection of becoming a 'gentleman' and the gradual collapse of the class system in his times as implied in this novel. Comparisons between *Of Human Bondage* and 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey' are based on my notes taken from memory outside the manuscript reading room, as per the restrictions of the Library of Congress. I also analyse the historical background of being a gentleman, the aesthetic movements, and Maugham's irony regarding English traditions.

The culturally loaded word 'gentleman' underwent significant modification in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time allowing for more social-class mobility. Originated from medieval knightly culture, the appellation 'gentleman' carrying an ideal of refinement and chivalry was adapted and modified to fit contemporary needs in Victorian times, becoming an "invented tradition": it can be gained by wealth as well as by birth (Berberich *English Gentleman* 18–21). Victorian middle-class industrialists and businessmen sent their sons to Eton and Oxbridge, seeking to merge their families with upper-class ones (20). The gentlemanly codes, such as being patriotic, generous, broad-minded, decent, and chivalrous, were institutionalised in public schools, "factories for gentlemen" (18). By the early twentieth century, traditional gentlemanly ideals were considered to be in decline, with the rise of commerce and business (Berberich *English Gentleman* 10). The old class system did not change dramatically, but it became increasingly easy to leap over class barriers (19). Victorian novels often describe gentlemen in uniform-like apparel: high collars, top hats, and dark suits, preoccupied with old values such as British masculinity, sports, Christianity, and Empire building. Berberich's book examines the declining image of the gentleman in twentieth-century novels, capturing power discourses and homoerotic relationships/friendships. I do not intend to place Maugham within the framework of gender and culture studies, but his androgynous characters (Mildred in *Of Human Bondage*,

Neil MacAdam in 'Neil MacAdam', for example), along with the early chapters of homoerotic friendship between Philip Carey and his public-school mate Rose, indeed questioned heterosexual-oriented British masculinity.

Maugham's problematisation of the declining gentleman image starts from his autobiographical experiences in the historic King's School, "widely regarded as the oldest school in England" (The King's School "History"). It was founded by a Royal Charter from Henry VIII in 1541 on the site of the United Kingdom's first cathedral, Canterbury Cathedral (The King's School "History"), with its pupils connected to history and prepared to enter Oxford and Cambridge. From eleven to fifteen years old, Maugham attended the King's School (1885–1889), later contributing as a Governor and a significant benefactor, and is buried in the garden below the Maugham Library at the school (The King's School "Maugham"). Although Canterbury had become "something of a backwater" in Maugham's times, when the coming of railways allowed the more prosperous Kentish families to send their sons to Eton, Harrow, and Westminster (Hastings 28), this prestigious school represents Maugham's provincial adoptive family's wish for the boy to become a gentleman. In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip Carey went to the King's School, Tercanbury (an obvious pseudonym for Canterbury). Maugham's biographer Ted Morgan comments that the descriptions of the school and the schoolmasters are so precise that the author "photographed" them all (19).

*Of Human Bondage* ironically characterises the old-fashioned schoolmasters who clung to the traditions of being a gentleman. In contrast, the portrait of Tom Perkins (real name: Thomas Field) who was appointed as the headmaster of the King's School in 1886 shows that "upward mobility was possible in Victorian times" (Morgan 20). *Of Human Bondage* contains more emotional and factual accuracy than the 1898 manuscript, where the only schoolmaster Maugham described was Mr Sudget (counterpart to Mr Watson in *Of Human Bondage*) in the preparatory school. In *Of Human Bondage*, the young protagonist

emotionally connects with the headmaster Mr Perkins in the senior school for they were both bullied by the ‘gentlemanly’ schoolmasters as inferior. In real life, the author is said to admire and “adore” Mr Thomas Field (Hastings 31).<sup>50</sup> Maugham’s fictional reincarnation of the headmaster, and his sarcastic characterisation of the schoolmasters ‘nostalgic’ for the rosy dream of an idealised past, provide a full picture of the historical background of rising social mobility and the old generation’s nostalgia.

Tom Perkins comes from the lower classes, the son of a bankrupt linendraper. His excellent school record earns him the best scholarship, but he is by no means a gentleman:

He was a small, dark boy, with untidy black hair and large eyes. He looked like a gipsy. He had come to the school as a day-boy, with the best scholarship on their endowment, so that his education had cost him nothing. Of course he was brilliant. (*HB* 57)

The ‘untidy’, ‘gipsy’ Perkins did well at the King’s School and eventually found his way to Magdalen College, Oxford. At the age of thirty-two, he was appointed as the headmaster of the King’s School, retaining the same “wild and unkempt look” as his boyhood (*HB* 58). Mr Perkins was Philip Carey’s favourite teacher, considerate and knowledgeable. He empathised with Philip when the boy was ridiculed by another teacher, Mr Gordon, as a “clubfoot blockhead”, as years ago Mr Perkins was called a gipsy counter-jumper by Mr Gordon in his form (66). Both Philip and Mr Perkins were marginalised from the world of gentlemen at the King’s School, dominated by the old generation of schoolmasters. Mr Gordon is ironically described as callous, sarcastic, and selfish, in contrast to the generous and chivalric codes internalised by the gentleman image and institutionalised by the most historical public schools in England.

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<sup>50</sup> During my archival research in the King’s School in April 2025, I browsed the photos and school-related materials which confirm Maugham’s attachment to Mr Thomas Field. See Harold S. Goodrich, *Thomas Field, D. D.: A Memoir*, with a Foreword by the Lord Bishop of London. No edition details. In one photo preserved in the school archival office, ten-year-old Maugham clung to the leg of a seated Mr Field.

The nostalgia for ‘gentlemen by birth’ and anxiety about the undercurrents of social change are exemplified in another schoolmaster, whose name is metaphorically nostalgic, Mr Sighs. He is described as an indolent, arrogant, and irresponsible teacher, “who had conducted the fifth form for five-and-twenty years with unparalleled incompetence” (*HB* 58), but felt comfortable with his position secured by his social status. Upon hearing the nomination of the new headmaster, Mr Sighs said, with noticeable nervousness, “The only thing is to prepare ourselves for changes” (*HB* 58). Such anxiety progresses to a humorously ironical conversation a week after Mr Perkins’s inauguration, between Mr Sighs and his colleague Mr Tar:

“Well, we’ve seen a good many Speech-Days here, haven’t we? I wonder if we shall see another.”

Sighs was more melancholy even than usual.

“If anything worth having comes along in the way of a living I don’t mind when I retire.” (*HB* 60)

Sighs’ words imply that he would become jobless facing social transformation. The portrayals of Gordon and Sighs ironically reveal the incongruity between these gentlemen’s characters and conventional gentlemanly codes. Maugham’s awareness of social change and his critique of the gentleman image are no less effective than Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, which “dismantles traditional codes of gentlemanliness” (Berberich “The Good Soldier” 20). The image of a traditional gentleman is queried, problematised, and ironically eroded, displaced by such modernists elements as incomprehension, lack of *sensus communis*, and fatigue (Terzieva-Artemis and Lobb 36). The school chapters in *Of Human Bondage* portray a comprehensive background of the collapsing class system and the rising social mobility, embodying Maugham’s subtle but powerful critique of the gentleman image.

Class demarcation lines become more fluid and porous in *Of Human Bondage*.

Maugham was also conscious of the difference between what Berberich designates as a ‘self-

fashioned' gentleman and a 'self-made' one: a self-fashioned gentleman knowingly models himself according to certain behavioural rules; a self-made man builds up a career, business or fortune out of nothing (Berberich *English Gentleman* 16). According to this definition, the headmaster Mr Perkins is a self-made gentleman; Philip's uncle and aunt expected him to become a 'self-fashioned' man. Mrs Carey modifies her expectations from her limited knowledge of gentlemanly occupations, which do not include the emerging industries such as engineering. Here is an extract of her ludicrous career plan for Philip:

Mrs. Carey thought there were only four professions for a gentleman, the Army, the Navy, the Law, and the Church. She had added medicine because her brother-in-law practiced it, but did not forget that in her young days no one ever considered the doctor a gentleman. The first two were out of the question, and Philip was firm in his refusal to be ordained. Only the law remained. The local doctor had suggested that many gentlemen now went in for engineering, but Mrs. Carey opposed the idea at once. (*HB* 148)

This shows that the gentleman's professions underwent modification. Mrs Carey 'self-fashions' her brother-in-law who practises medicine as a gentleman, then the local doctor is also considered a gentleman (enabling Mrs Carey to ask him for advice). Mrs Carey keeps indoctrinating Philip with the idea that his father is a gentleman: "he should not forget, they said, that his father and mother were gentlesfolk" (*HB* 184).

Philip did not realise this idea was self-fashioned until he travelled to Germany at the age of sixteen. In Heidelberg, Philip had an argument with his American housemate Mr Weeks on the Church of England. Weeks asked Philip what a gentleman is:

"And in England dissenters aren't gentlemen, are they?" asked Weeks.

"Well, if you ask me point-blank, they're not," replied Philip rather crossly.

He hated being laughed at, and they laughed again.

"And will you tell me what a gentleman is?" asked Weeks.

“Oh, I don’t know; everyone knows what it is.”

[...]

“Couldn’t you give me a few more particulars?” asked Weeks.

Philip reddened, but, growing angry, did not care if he made himself ridiculous.

“I can give you plenty.” He remembered his uncle’s saying that it took three generations to make a gentleman: it was a companion proverb to the silk purse and the sow’s ear. “First of all he’s the son of a gentleman, and he’s been to a public school and to Oxford or Cambridge.”

“Edinburgh wouldn’t do, I suppose?” asked Weeks.

“And he talks English like a gentleman, and he wears the right sort of things, and if he’s a gentleman he can always tell if another chap’s a gentleman.”

It seemed rather lame to Philip as he went on, but there it was: that was what he meant by the word, and everyone he had ever known meant that too. (*HB* 119)

Philip mentions two layers of meanings of being a gentleman: ‘the son of a gentleman’ means “gentleman by birth”, while being educated in ‘public school’, ‘Oxford or Cambridge’ means “gentleman by nature” (Berberich *English Gentleman* 18–20). With a closer look at Philip’s explanation, ‘the son of a gentleman’ suggests Victorian class mobility, where one could earn the title by wealth, marriage, or success. On the contrary, Philip’s uncle holds onto the conventions of ‘gentleman by birth’ through the proverb ‘you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear’. Philip’s last sentence implies that he became self-reflective and critical of the values and importance of being a gentleman with which he had been educated.

The character Mr Weeks is developed from Mr House in ‘The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey’, an American Unitarian dissenter. Although the earlier draft did not directly touch on the definition of ‘gentleman’, Mr House has a more sarcastic

tone in criticising Englishness: “I am glad that I am not an Englishman,’ said Mr House in reply, ‘I do not want to leave behind me a history of fraud, deceit, cruelty, hypocrisy, rapacity, and double-dealing’. Stephen turned pale.” (“ATSC” 1 122). Their conversation continues, shattering Stephen’s stereotyped pride in his English nationality:

“Do you mean to say that you would not rather to be English than American!”

Stephen cried, aghast.

“Indeed, I do.”

“I thought everyone wanted rather to be an Englishman,” murmured Stephen.

“But haven’t you noticed that a Frenchman is rather proud to be French?”

“I thought they only pretended to be.” (“ATSC” 1 122–23).

The American character’s tone became milder in *Of Human Bondage*, yet the Mr Weeks/Mr House character takes the role of transnational mentor, guiding the protagonist to think outside English traditions. Another impact is that, after their pages-long discussions, the protagonist reflected on his religion and ceased to believe in God. He started to realise that believing in a certain religion is also contingent and it is not the religion that makes a person virtuous, but their innate character: “It was evidently possible to be virtuous and unbelieving” (*HB* 121). This episode that took place outside England opens a logic that could include Asia and other Eastern regions in its remit to reflect on nationality and identity, unlike the colonial chauvinism that retained a strict hierarchy of virtue.

Philip’s epiphany in Germany is autobiographical. Maugham wrote: “when I went to Germany I discovered that the Germans were just as proud of being Germans as I was proud of being English. [...] It struck me that I might very well have been born in South Germany, and then I should naturally have been brought up as a Catholic” (*SU* 242).

Maugham’s reflection in his memoir was almost verbatim in *Of Human Bondage*:

[...] he could not help saying to himself that if he had been born in South Germany he would certainly have been a Roman Catholic. He might just as well have been born in a Roman Catholic country as in England; and in England as well in a Wesleyan, Baptist, or Methodist family as in one that fortunately belonged to the church by the law established. (*HB* 121)

The experience of Germany enabled Maugham/Philip to befriend non-English people and glimpse the world outside English traditions, preparing them to explore the contingency of human life in more cosmopolitan contexts that transcend, and sometimes contradict, mainstream gentlemanly narratives in England. This logic also prepares Maugham and his later characters/narrators to value Eastern environments without national prejudice and further critique those colonisers enclosed in their cultural identity and imperialist narrative.

In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip's decision of giving up his religion is described as a reflexive process, cumulating in an epiphanic and poetic moment:

He put off the faith of his childhood quite simply, like a cloak that he no longer needed. (*HB* 123)

Freedom! He was his own master at last. From old habit, unconsciously he thanked God that he no longer believed in Him. (*HB* 124)

The 'cloak' from childhood symbolises religion's restrictive effects on a person's natural development. Philip Carey's faith was forced upon him by his adoptive family, not by nature. Liberating himself from religion gives him a sense of freedom, resonating with Stephen Dedalus' epiphanic moment in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable. (Joyce 170)

Both autobiographical novels trace the protagonists' tormented childhoods in public schools, unrequited love, artistic temperaments, and spiritual maturation into their twenties with abrupt endings. Like Philip Carey's gradual withdrawal from English conventions as 'bondage' forced from outside, Stephen Dedalus also has a burgeoning desire to be far away from his father and his masters "urging him to be a gentleman" (Joyce, cited in Castle 672). In this sense, Philip Carey becomes a modernist hero who courageously breaks with his past, seeking to find himself in a world of unknown. Like *Portrait, Of Human Bondage* negotiates "complex problems concerning identity, nationality, education, the role of the artist, and social as well as personal relationships" (Castle 670). Philip's 'cloak' is similar to Stephen's 'graveclothes', and Philip's exclamation of 'Freedom!' resonates with Stephen's crescendo of 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'. Then both heroes find their 'self': being 'his own master' to 'create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul'. The relinquishment of religion allows for the emergence of 'self' and prepares Philip and Stephen to further pursue new art in Paris.

Philip Carey's revelations attest to Maugham's radical break with Victorian traditions. Jeffrey Meyers claims that "the early part of the novel [*Of Human Bondage*] is solidly Victorian and follows the tradition of Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*: the drama of a gifted, sensitive and abused orphan child who overcomes disabilities and survives to adulthood" (*SMAL* 144). The beginning chapters in *Of Human Bondage* indeed read like a Dickens novel, but Maugham leads the narrative into a totally different direction. The protagonist's name Philip may be parodying the well-known Dickens character Pip (Philip) in *Great Expectations*. Unlike Pip's constant yearning to be a gentleman, Philip Carey refuses to be a gentleman from the beginning. This makes *Of Human Bondage* radically different from the 'Stephen Carey' draft. The 1898 draft is closer to the Dickens narrative particularly when the protagonist buys luxury clothes and imitates the gentleman's lifestyle as a clerk in London, a snobbish tendency totally non-existent in

Philip Carey. The earlier draft resolves in Stephen Carey's realisation of his family's kindness over a grave illness of which he almost died; after that, he came to a similar realisation as Pip's that "it is the inner values rather than the outer manifestation of fortune which make a man a gentleman" (Berberich *English Gentleman* 35). Philip Carey never desires to be a gentleman. He does not resemble any Dickens protagonist that seeks to make sense of their origins as a way of moving forward in life – instead, he leaves his origins behind from the start. Then it is reasonable to say that *Of Human Bondage* can be read as a parody of *Great Expectations*: even the slovenly, boyish tea-shop attendant Mildred (in the earlier draft a more feminine character) parodies the beautiful and wealthy Estella.

Philip Carey is Maugham's first modernist hero that strikes into new territory (real or metaphorical) where there are no solid answers, in a modern time that lacks certainty in terms of social and cultural benchmarks. He dives into the world of art, in opposition to the world of the gentleman. When Philip declared he was going to study art in Paris, Mr and Mrs Carey were "frankly shocked", saying "painting wasn't a serious profession; it was Bohemian, disreputable, immoral. And then Paris!" (*HB* 184). Philip's fascination with art and natural beauty as resistance to the industrialised English society resonates with Paul Morel's painting in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, but more radical, as Philip grasps the cusp of modernist movements by modelling the impressionist masters' painting on their first exhibitions in Paris. His self-exile opens up a possibility for Maugham's later modernist heroes, most typically Charles Strickland, to travel to Eastern regions and incorporate non-European aesthetics in their artwork. Maugham himself (as the autobiographical Philip Carey) crucially expressed multiple times his desire to visit East Asia in the early stage of his writing career. The writer's emerging awareness of non-English and non-European elements prepares him for his Eastern travels, and more significantly, for his later incorporation of art and philosophy from East Asia as a part of his own aesthetics.

The Paris chapters in *Of Human Bondage* continue Maugham's ironic approach to British novel traditions. His naming of one art student as Fanny Price is clearly a conscious parody of Jane Austen's heroine Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (1814). In his essay on Jane Austen, Maugham denounces the moral lessons in *Mansfield Park*: "the hero and heroine, Fanny and Edmund, are intolerable prigs" (*TNTA* 63). Maugham's Fanny Price bears no similarity to the elegant Jane Austen heroine; almost to the contrary, she martyrs herself to the creation of new arts. She is twenty-six, one of the most diligent students at the art school, who "talked enthusiastically about Monet and the impressionists" but her paintings were "ill-drawn" (*HB* 236). Fanny was drawn to Philip, but Philip dislikes her unkempt physical appearance:

She had a large face, with broad, flat features and small eyes; her skin was pasty, with a singular unhealthiness of tone, and there was no color in the cheeks. She had an unwashed tone, and you could not help wondering if she slept in her clothes. She was serious and silent. (*HB* 193)

One day, Philip received a letter from Fanny and found her hanged body in her musty, squalid room. She died of despair and starvation. Fanny's only food every day is a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread: "she ate half the loaf and drank half the milk at midday when she came back from the school, and consumed the rest in the evening. It was the same day after day." (*HB* 255). Like Philip, Fanny came to Paris against her family's expectation: her mother and rubber-merchant brother told her, "Paris was no place for a girl. And there's no money in art" (*HB* 256). Her brother's refusal to loan her money led to this pathetic suicide. This unforgettable tragic scene shatters Philip's romantic idea about Paris artists and leads to his abandoning art and returning to England.

Fanny Price's death generates no sympathy in her family. They didn't even attend her funeral. Only her fellow art students, who were not even her friends when she was alive, were present. This character's tragic story subverts Jane Austen's characterisation strategy

that the heroine often grows into a resilient and independent woman, ending with her marriage and happiness in the family. Maugham's Fanny Price *is* resilient and independent in nature but is *excluded* from her family for her artistic dedication. Maugham's characterisation of Fanny Price is intentional and revolutionary in criticising Austen's moral education in her novels. The setting of Post-Impressionist Paris adds to his anti-traditional purpose, dismantling the classical Austen ideas of womanhood and family.

Maugham's more direct attack on the Victorian traditions is reflected through the most talented student in the art school, the American student, Lawson:

Besides, damn the Great Victorians. Whenever I open a paper and see Death of a Great Victorian, I thank Heaven there's one more of them gone. Their only talent was longevity, and no artist should be allowed to live after he's forty; by then a man has done his best work, all he does after that is repetition. (*HB* 203)

The Paris chapters are inferred to be set in the 1890s because in Chapter XCVIII, Hayward went to the Cape to fight in the Second Boer War and by then Philip had known him (in the Heidelberg chapters) for eight years. Paris in the 1890s saw the artistic blossoming of Impressionism, a term coined in 1874 (Hussey 661). In Philip's story, the art students lived in the Latin Quarter and visited the Louvre and the Luxembourg Museum to appreciate Manet, Monet, and Degas. This period also saw the Symbolist movement in literature, seeking to capture the immaterial and the intangible through symbols: it is a "revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition" (Symons 10). These aesthetic movements are reflected in the decadent poet Cronshaw, a friend of Lawson, who "knew [Walter] Pater and Oscar Wilde", and "knows Mallarmé and all those fellows" (*HB* 205).

Maugham first read Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde in Germany, under the influence of John Ellingham Brooks (Hayward in *Of Human Bondage*), and became familiar with their aestheticism encapsulated in the maxim "art for art's sake" (Pater 62). The Paris chapters

are based on Maugham's Bohemian experiences in 1904–05, when he lived on the Left Bank as an emerging writer and playwright, learned painting, and formulated an enduring friendship with the painter Gerald Kelly. Maugham joined the gathering of a group of soon-to-be-famous artists in Le Chat Blanc restaurant on the rue d'Odessa, fictionalised as Le Chien Noir café in his novel *The Magician* (1908). Their habitual gathering acutely resembles, anticipates, or maybe inspires, those of the Bloomsbury group in London and the 'Lost Generation' of Hemingway, Stein, Joyce, and others in Paris a decade later. Maugham is connected to both literary groups. In the Bloomsbury group, he knew Clive Bell in Le Chat Blanc in 1904 and kept correspondence with him afterwards.<sup>51</sup> Virginia Woolf wrote an unsigned review for Maugham's play *The Land of the Blessed* (1905) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, praising him in that "he has his pen well under control" (Curtis and Whitehead 41). Woolf also congratulated Maugham on the publication of *The Summing Up* (1938) (*SMAL* 288; Raphael 84) and met Maugham at a dinner party in London that year (*SMAL* 292). Maugham's links with the 'Lost Generation' group included his mutual admiration with Hemingway (Raphael 67). In 1934, Hemingway recommended *Of Human Bondage*, which he read ten years earlier in Paris, to a young writer (My Maugham Collection; Ross). Maugham included Hemingway's 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' in his edited book *Great Modern Reading* (1943) (My Maugham Collection).

La Closerie de Lilas, the café where Hemingway invariably sat to write *The Sun Also Rises*, is the place where Cronshaw coins the Persian rug metaphor in *Of Human Bondage*:

La Closerie des Lilas was a cafe to which they often went in the evening after dinner, and here Cronshaw was invariably to be found between the hours of nine at night and two in the morning. (*HB* 203)

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<sup>51</sup> In 1956, Clive Bell published his memoir *Old Friends*, with a chapter recollecting the Paris Bohemian life in 1904. Bell sent the book to Maugham but insisted that he first knew Maugham in London, not Paris. See Clive Bell, "Correspondence to W. Somerset Maugham." Box 1, Folder 15, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, undated; Clive Bell, *Old Friends: Personal Recollections*. Chatto, 1956.

The café La Closerie des Lilas opened in 1847, first hosted meetings of Impressionist artists, before becoming a literary mecca towards the end of the nineteenth century: frequent visitors include Emile Zola, Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Andre Gide (Nanta). In the 1920s, the café became one centre of American writers' gathering – in the neighbourhood of Montparnasse where Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway lived.<sup>52</sup> It is also the place where James Joyce celebrated the news that Sylvia Beach agreed to publish *Ulysses* (Travelbyart). In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway fondly remembered his friends – F. Scott Fitzgerald, Evan Shipman, and Ezra Pound – in this café, and launched his humorous revenge on Ford Madox Ford's teasing comment that American writers are not gentlemen (78–79).

This section has reviewed Maugham's critical engagement with traditional values and his exploration of new ways of writing, seeing, and being, in a historical and artistic context of transformation. The characters in *Of Human Bondage* reject social and aesthetic conventions, reflecting Maugham's oblique critique of Englishness embedded in cultural superiority and materialistic pursuits. Aligning with Maugham's autobiographical search for identity beyond his English nationality, these early chapters in *Of Human Bondage* embrace cosmopolitanism as a way to liberate Philip Carey/young Maugham from the confines of English traditions. This non-English approach lays the foundation for Maugham's departure from the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman* genre and propels his journey to the East, a journey in search of something immaterial and intangible, different from traditions and conducive for his self-liberation.

## Heart of Brightness

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<sup>52</sup> See the 'Map of the Left Bank and Montparnasse' in Humphrey Carpenter, *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s*. 1st American ed., Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988.

The following section examines the circulation of Maugham's imperialist critique from a European setting to emerging Eastern modernities through sea travels. The previous section set up Englishness as a condition of Maugham's 'human bondage' that restricts humanity and sees transnational travel as a way of seeking liberation. Maugham's sea routes, then, bring this internal trauma, rather than national pride, of Western characters to the East, exploring the possibilities of Western characters' 'integration' within themselves and with their Eastern environments. Essentially, Maugham's characters either liberate themselves or continue to suffer from this condition of bondage, depending on whether or not they treat the imperial narrative and chauvinism critically.

Through his use of pathetic fallacy, Maugham projects Western characters' inner worlds onto his depiction of the environment. At the first glance, the majority of Maugham's Eastern stories seem to continue Conrad's gloomy atmosphere, telling horror stories through murder, adultery, and suicide, which leads to critics' Orientalist criticism. Upon closer reading, Maugham's 'darkness' in the Eastern environment is actually brought by the dark side of Western humanity, which turns out to be the root of his fictional tragedies. Maugham's critique of Western civilisation is subtly woven into his symbolism, most notably, the rain for "repressed sexuality" (Morgan 215). Maugham describes the Eastern environment as a metonym for his Western characters, suggesting the degeneration of Western civilisation or finding freedom by embracing local environments without prejudice.

Eastern modernities are embodied in Maugham's awareness of local people's subjectivity and intellectual resistance, particularly in his conversation with a Chinese philosopher whose attack on Western civilisation finds its way into one fictional character in the play *East of Suez* and Maugham's own critique in the non-fiction *The Gentleman in the Parlour*. Against the historical background of the May Fourth Movement, Gu Hongming's criticism that the British Empire's success only relies on machine guns resonates with

Maugham's earliest doubt over the empire in his notebook of 1896, reflecting on the Boer War when he was twenty-two: "It is an unequal encounter, a contest without nobility or chivalry between good weapons and bad" (*WN* 24). My reading of Maugham's encounter with the Chinese philosopher refutes existing postcolonial interpretations of Maugham's cultural superiority; instead, it reflects Maugham's criticism of the empire and his deep awareness of Chinese modernity. Maugham's sea routes navigating global modernity allow more critical examination of Maugham's East beyond the postcolonial binaries such as civilised/primitive, culture/nature, self/other, centre/periphery. Below are three limitations in postcolonial criticism of Maugham set out in PhD theses published in the 1990s.

The first problem is reading Maugham's fiction only at its surface level. There is a tendency to misread characters' imperial prejudice as the author's own, which Philip Holden shrewdly points out is embedded in Said's slippage envisioning "writer and text as equivalences" (Holden "Colonizing Masculinity" 41), a theoretical confusion throughout *Orientalism*. To balance this, Holden intervenes his postcolonial framework with Sedgwick's gender lens in his homoerotic reading, bringing the narrator into the triangle with the other two roles of desire: the "male precursor and feminized landscape" ("Colonizing Masculinity" 60). This ingenious postcolonial methodology combined with gender studies, however, still simplifies Maugham's Eastern fiction into the physical appearance of characters and environments, transmuting characters' dynamic spiritual worlds and Maugham's intricate narrative into gender relationships. Holden's limitation is evident on the first page of his thesis: "In Maugham's fiction, meaning is often on the surface, and the text itself needs little explication or annotation" (Holden "Colonizing Masculinity" 1). My reading of *Of Human Bondage* as modernist fiction locates Maugham's intertextual complexity in his parody of English literary traditions. In this section, I seek to unpack specific modernist techniques, such as the figure of the unreliable narrator and symbolism, in Maugham's recognisably best-known short story 'Rain' and the novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, among other stories. To

achieve this, I will compare Maugham's Eastern fiction with that of Joseph Conrad. As Fredric Jameson notes, in Conrad's works we can sense the emergence of "what will be contemporary modernism" (*The Political Unconscious* 194), or even postmodernism, through his "fragmentation of the raw material" (211). With this comparison, I hope to uncover the complexity of Maugham's seemingly straightforward style and re-evaluate his method of using the Eastern environment as an imperialist critique.

Another pitfall of postcolonial reading is the strawman fallacy, which attributes the Eastern environment as the reason for Western character's degeneration. This tendency dominates Mamta Chaudhary's Chapter Four on Maugham's representation of the Eastern environment, which she describes as 'alien' and 'primitive' as contrasted to the civilised, well-ordered Western world. Chaudhary writes that Maugham's East "is ultimately responsible for the aberrations in behaviour of people from the 'civilised' world" (194). Philip Holden also sets up this binary, arguing that "for the various narrators of his story, contact with the primitive means dissolution, loss of control, alcoholism and eventually death" ("Colonizing Masculinity" 92). Both theses use Maugham's short story 'The Pool' as an example to support the argument "it is the primitive that is subject to critique" (Holden "Colonizing Masculinity" 92). 'The Pool' tells the story of Lawson, a Scot, who falls in love with a half-caste girl, Ethel, in Apia and marries her. Because of this marriage, he is isolated from white society. Suffering from marginalisation and his inability to 'convert' Ethel into a 'civilised' woman, Lawson drowns himself in the pool where he first met Ethel. Holden and Chaudhary seem to agree with other white characters in the English Club in Apia, who said "He was a darned fool to marry her" (P, *CSS 1* 163), leading to the argument that "Lawson's principal error, of course lies in having married Ethel" (Chaudhary 196). This logic falls into the first problem of misreading Maugham's text by its literal meaning in addition to mistaking the character's attitude for the author's. Maugham's irony is that Lawson's colonial mindset of bringing civilisation to Ethel and her world actually distances him from

the girl he loves. “For God’s sake speak in a civilized language,” he said “irritably” to Ethel (P, *CSS 1* 146). Lawson names their son Andrew, wishing to “make a real Scot of him” who would “marry a white woman” (P, *CSS 1* 147). It is not the ‘primitive’ character or environment that ruins Lawson, but his dismissive attitude towards them.

The third problem is generalisation, which to some extent intersects with the first two problems. Holden obviously generalises that “Maugham’s meaning is often on the surface”, and Chaudhary generalises that “the East is ultimately responsible for white men’s degeneration”. Another example is Xingbo Li’s PhD thesis, *Images of China in the Twentieth Century Colonial Discourse*. He writes in Chapter One, “throughout Maugham’s works, none of the Englishmen who married an Oriental woman has a good ending” (22). However, Maugham provides evident examples of happy couples of Western characters and Eastern women: Waddington and his Manchu wife in *The Painted Veil*, Strickland and Ata in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and Edward (American in this case) and Eva in ‘The Fall of Edward Barnard’. More crucially, it is the Western characters’ willingness to embrace another culture that leads to the happiness of their marriage, in contrast to the imperialist ideology that leads to tragedies.

All the three studies above examine the power relationships between Western characters and the Eastern environment in their postcolonial readings. In his well-written PhD chapter on Maugham (supervised by the late distinguished theorist André Lefevre), Xingbo Li sees the Chinese woman in Manchu dress as an object of Maugham’s colonialist gaze (26). He writes that, in the play *East of Suez*, the half-caste heroine Daisy Rathbone in Manchu dress “signals the victory of Harry over Daisy, white over yellow, and male over female” (23). However, Li seems to side with the Western hegemony in the sentence “the ‘Western’, or assertive, side of Daisy quickly disappears when, near the end of the play, [...] she puts the dress on again and goes back to Lee Tai Cheng and the Chinese people” (23). He didn’t recognise that the power relationship between Daisy and Harry, her husband, is

inverted in the end. Like ‘The Pool’, *East of Suez* strengthens the colonial stereotype that a man who marries a half-caste is a “damned fool” and will “never get a good job” (ES, CP 3 110). Daisy suffers from this mindset, wishing to be a pure European woman by rejecting her ex-husband Lee Tai Cheng, a Chinese merchant, and his gifts. The play resolves with Daisy’s embrace of her Chinese identity: she puts on the Manchu dress and paints her face in a Chinese style, to resist Harry’s fury. The final scene ends with a stage instruction: “He bursts into a storm of sobs. Motionless she contemplates in the glass the Chinese woman of the reflection” (ES, CP 3 219). Harry is feminised in crying while Daisy gains her power by recognising her Chinese identity.

The character Lee Tai Cheng in *East of Suez* embodies Maugham’s awareness of Chinese intellectuals’ resistance to Western power, refuting the postcolonial approach that has Maugham portray the East as ‘ahistorical’ and outside modern temporality, as argued by both Chaudhary and Holden. This character is modelled on Gu Hongming, the Chinese philosopher Maugham met in Beijing in 1919, in the context of May Fourth Movement I mentioned in Chapter One. The philosopher is a transnational character who grew up in the British colony of Penang, was educated in Europe, and ended up as Confucianist to resist British imperialism. Like Gu, Lee Tai studied in Edinburgh, Oxford, and Harvard, speaks fluent English, but remains proud of his Chinese identity and culture. Lee Tai’s lines, quoted below, are almost verbatim from Gu’s words in ‘The Philosopher’ in *On a Chinese Screen*. These lines in *East of Suez* pose a fundamental critique of Western superiority, subverting the ‘East as Other’ stereotype in Maugham’s times:

George. [...] If you have any love for China you must see that her only chance to take her rightful place in the world is to accept honestly and sincerely the teaching of the West.

Lee Tai. And if in our hearts we despise and detest what you have to teach us? For what reason are you so confident that you are so superior to us that

it behoves us to sit humbly at your feet? Have you excelled us in arts or letters? Have our thinkers been less profound than yours? Has our civilization been less elaborate, less complicated, less refined than yours? Why, when you lived in caves and clothed yourselves with skins we were a cultured people. Do you know that we tried an experiment which is unique in the world?

George. [*Good-naturedly.*] What experiment is that?

Lee Tai. We sought to rule this great people not by force, but by wisdom. And for centuries we succeeded. Then why does the white man despise the yellow? Shall I tell you?

George. Do.

Lee Tai. [*With a smiling contempt.*] Because he has invented the machine-gun. That is your superiority. We are a defenceless horde and you can blow us into eternity. [*With a tinge of sadness.*] You have shattered the dream of our philosophers that the world could be governed by the power of law and order.... And now you are teaching our young men your secret. You have thrust your hideous inventions upon us. Fools. Do you not know that we have a genius for mechanics? Do you not know that there are in this country four hundred millions of the most practical and industrious people in the world? Do you think it will take us long to learn? And what will become of your superiority when the yellow man can make as good guns as the white and fire them as straight? You have appealed to the machine-gun and by the machine-gun shall you be judged. (ES, CP 3 191–92)

Lee Tai's logic that Chinese people rule by wisdom, not by force, and that Western superiority lies only in the machine gun directly comes from Gu's lines in 'The Philosopher':

“But you, do you know what you are doing?” he exclaimed. [...] “You have appealed to the machine gun and by the machine gun shall you be judged.”

(‘The Philosopher’, *OCS* 153–54)

In Maugham’s manuscripts, this paragraph is completely unchanged, except for the removal of a paragraph break and a sentence during the proofreading stage when Gu mentioned “the old system of examination” and Maugham “nodded” (“OCS” MS 154). According to the handwritten page number, Maugham originally intended to place ‘The Philosopher’ at the beginning of the book (pages 1–14), highlighting the significance of this meeting on his work. Maugham probably had read Gu’s writings in English before his visit, as he showed extreme respect to the philosopher, to the extent that he seemed condescending. As Lydia H. Liu notes, a similar view was expressed in Gu’s essay ‘For the Cause of Good Government in China’ published in 1901, as a resistance to Sir Robert Hart’s warning about a future of “Boxdom” in China (162). Gu’s most influential book, *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, was published in English in 1915. In the Preface, he claimed it was “an attempt to interpret the spirit and show the value of the Chinese civilisation” (Hongming Gu 5) in contrast to “the worship of the mob in Great Britain and the worship of might in Germany” (8). He argued that the spirit of the Chinese people is a moral force which can “make militarism unnecessary” (3). The book defines the Chinese character as depth, breadth, and simplicity, criticising the mob-worshipping tendency in Europe, a subversive idea that caused a stir among Western intellectuals in a critical time of modernisation.

Chunmei Du, a Chinese historian and expert on Gu Hongming, proposes a framework of the ‘mobius strip’ to read this East–West encounter. However, Du seems to endorse the Fu Manchu and Limehouse stereotypes, remaining limited to the ‘East as Other’ methodology and isolating her analysis to Maugham’s writing only about this philosopher. Her ‘mobius strip’ namely proposes a model of East–West continuum, claiming that “East and West are constantly interacting [...] actually merge as one object”

(Chunmei Du “Travel Along the Mobius Strip” 1). However, her reading method is based on an ‘East as Other’ model, featuring distance rather than integration. My reading of ‘The Philosopher’ situates the conversation as a continuation of Maugham’s starting point of rejecting Englishness, as seen in *Of Human Bondage*, extending to his imperialist critique in his Eastern fiction, and finally finds its way to Maugham’s own logic of debunking British militarism and imperialism in *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, analysed in the next section.

The remaining part of this section examines Maugham’s descriptions of the Eastern environment as a ‘bright’ land before being contaminated by the colonial mindset, in stories set in the South Seas, Malaya, Borneo, Burma, and China. This perspective differs from the inherent ‘darkness’ in the works of Conrad, who has been inevitably mentioned in postcolonial studies on Maugham. Biographer Jeffrey Meyers mentions the parallels in life and work between the two authors in his biographies, but in an online essay ‘Under Eastern Eyes: Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham’ (July 2024), he judges Maugham’s character without any close reading: “Conrad’s passionate commitment to the deeper implications of his novels made him a much greater writer than the reserved and reticent Maugham” (Meyers “Under Eastern Eyes”), leading to the *ad hominem* fallacy. Maugham’s lucid, clear style also differs from Conrad’s “impressionistic” style, “a literary and textual equivalent of the impressionist strategy in painting” (Jameson *The Political Unconscious* 213). Commenting on ‘Typhoon’ included in his anthology *Tellers of Tales* (1939), Maugham criticises Conrad’s style as “exuberant verbosity” with “little sense of concision” (cited in *SMAL* 185), which goes against his paramount principle of style – simplicity. With his use of symbolism and irony, Maugham launches a critique on the ‘darkness’ that white people bring to the East as a method of his modernism.

In his short story ‘Neil MacAdam’, Maugham pays direct tribute to Conrad, characterising the eponymous protagonist as an enthusiastic reader of Conrad. The following conversation takes place between the three main characters – Neil MacAdam, the

newcomer to Borneo as the Assistant Curator of a natural museum, Angus Munro, the Curator, and his Russian wife Darya:

“I read a lot of Conrad.”

“For pleasure or to improve your mind?”

“Both. I admire him awfully.”

Darya threw up her arms in an extravagant gesture of protest.

“That Pole,” she cried. “How can you English ever have let yourselves be taken in by that wordy mountebank? He has all the superficiality of his countrymen. That stream of words, those involved sentences, the showy rhetoric, that affectation of profundity: when you get through all that to the thought at the bottom, what do you find but a trivial commonplace? He was like a second-rate actor who puts on a romantic dress and declaims a play by Victor Hugo. For five minutes you say this is heroic, and then your whole soul revolts and you cry, no, this is false, false, false.”

She spoke with a passion that Neil had never known anyone show when speaking of art or literature. Her cheeks, usually colourless, flushed and her pale eyes glowed.

“There’s no one who got atmosphere like Conrad,” said Neil. “I can smell and see and feel the East when I read him.”

“Nonsense. What do you know about the East? Everyone will tell you that he made the grossest blunders. Ask Angus.”

“Of course he was not always accurate,” said Munro, in his measured, reflective way. “The Borneo he described is not the Borneo we know. He saw it from the deck of a merchant vessel and he was not an acute observer even of what he saw. But does it matter? I don’t know why fiction should be hampered by fact. I don’t think it’s a mean achievement to have created a

country, a dark, sinister, romantic and heroic country of the soul.” (NM, *CSS* 4 523–24)

This conversation reflects Maugham’s threefold interpretation of Conrad. Darya’s ‘wordy mountebank’ reference corresponds to Maugham’s criticism of Conrad’s ‘exuberant verbosity’, classifying Conrad’s writing as showy, commonplace, superficial and affected. Darya’s critique may be a result of a political feud between Russia, her home country, and Poland. Neil represents the general Western readers’ remote imagination and obsession with the exotic ‘atmosphere’ of the East. Angus Munro points out that Conrad’s East is not as accurate as the real East, as Conrad describes the East at a distance, from ‘the deck of a merchant vessel’, and is not particularly interested in the local life in Borneo. He also points out that fiction should be separated from fact, which is Maugham’s own literary opinion. Angus concludes his speech endorsing Conrad’s achievement for creating a ‘dark, sinister, romantic, and heroic’ Eastern world in his fiction. His viewpoint is probably the closest to Maugham’s opinion among the three, as Maugham’s fiction continues to explore the dark side of Western humanity as well as the romantic effect of the environment. This threefold interpretation roughly corresponds to my threefold methodology established in Chapter One: East as Other (Darya’s otherising Conrad as a political enemy), East as Reference (Conrad’s ‘atmosphere’ of the East), and East as Method (Conrad’s East as a method of reflecting humanity). The three characters’ debate shows Maugham’s self-reflection on how to read Conrad and how to represent the East in his fiction.

*The Trembling of a Leaf* (1921), Maugham’s first established collection of short stories based on his travels in the South Seas in 1916–17, centres on white men’s difficulty adapting to the Eastern environment. As R. A. Cordell writes, “the characters are Europeans in the South Seas, in an alien environment to which they adjust themselves with difficulty and often with loss of balance and tranquillity” (168). This collection sometimes inevitably romanticises Polynesian islands or demonises the residents, but as a result of

Maugham's first Eastern travel, its significance lies in Maugham's collage of Eastern and Western elements, creating a space of hybridity, or the "Third Space" as Homi Bhabha named it. This "in-between" space intervenes in the homogenising, unifying tendency of culture and enables the writer to enunciate cultural differences (Bhabha 51–56). In 'Honolulu', Maugham writes: "It is the meeting-place of East and West", where "electric cars rumble noisily along the streets [...] shops are filled with all the necessities of American civilisation" (H, *CSS 1* 87). The collage of American urban elements in a Pacific setting, and the juxtaposition of a modern schooner, always moving across seas, with fatal Polynesian sorcery operating on board, intervene in the static tendency of stereotyping East and West as a dichotomy.

In 'The Fall of Edward Barnard', the title character embraces the environment of Tahiti, marrying a local girl and selling cotton, without any desire to return to Chicago and make money, which his friend Bateman believes is a Biblical 'Fall'. Its idyllic description of Tahiti resembles that of *The Moon and Sixpence*, and its plot could be seen as the earliest prototype of *The Razor's Edge*: a young man breaks off the engagement with his beloved girl, escapes the bustling capitalism in Chicago, and happily exiles himself in a faraway place, finding his "Beauty, truth, and goodness" (B, *CSS 1* 79). The story's resolution is also similar to that in *The Razor's Edge*: Bateman is engaged to Isabel (the name remains the same), envisioning the expansion of his family company and the exquisite house for their marriage. The story ends with Isabel's sigh "Poor Edward" (B, *CSS 1* 85), revealing that Bateman and Isabel still live in their bubble dream of American capitalism. Maugham's South Seas provides an alternative to Western materialism for those who seek liberation from it, with potential to address the mind–body split prevalent in Western society. Comparing Bateman's Chicago with his Tahiti, Edward Barnard said, "I earn enough to keep body and soul together, and I'm quite satisfied with that." (B, *CSS 1* 64). In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Strickland is described as uncomfortable in evening clothes at parties with his

wife, symbolising his incompatibility with English bourgeois society: “He was broad and heavy, with large hands and feet, and he wore his evening clothes clumsily” (*MS* 20).

Strickland’s Cartesian struggles finally resolve in Tahiti, where his mind and body become unified: “It is as though in this far country his spirit, that had wandered disembodied, seeking a tenement, at last was able to clothe itself in flesh. To use the hackneyed phrase, here he found himself” (*MS* 156).

The narrative structure in *The Moon and Sixpence* bears strong Conradian influences. Maugham’s autobiographical first-person narrator traces the main character and interacts with other characters, gathering second- or third-hand evidence to present the story as much as he can. This story-telling technique is comparable to Conrad’s narrator Marlow and his frame narrative, such as in *Heart of Darkness* and the larger part of *Lord Jim*. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham’s narrator collects evidence from residents and sailors around Tahiti to picture Strickland’s final stage of life, similar to how Marlow in *Lord Jim* assembles the crucial events of Jim’s life from interviews with a formidable number of different sources (*Moses* 59). *The Moon and Sixpence* is a highly mediated narrative with a strong voice of the narrator in a form that mimics biography. The first half sets up Strickland as an irresponsible and immoral person, and in the middle of the book the narrator suddenly becomes self-critical and aware of his unreliability. He writes: “Looking back, I realize that what I have written about Charles Strickland must seem very unsatisfactory” (*MS* 148) and comments that “Strickland was an odious man, but I still think he was a great one” (*MS* 153). Maugham’s narrator serves a similar role as the chronicler and commentator Marlow who assembles Jim’s stories. At the end of the novel, Maugham’s narrator returns to Strickland’s wife and reports on Strickland’s whereabouts without mentioning the painter’s native wife in Tahiti, echoing Marlow’s return to Kurtz’s fiancée and hiding Kurtz’s last words from her at the end of *Heart of Darkness*. Both male narrators protect the female characters from knowing the other side of the world, which those

remaining in English society will never understand: Tahiti as freedom for Strickland's artistic self and Africa as Kurtz's gory expedition.

Maugham's later two short story collections, *The Casuarina Tree* (1926) and *Ah King* (1933), contain closer observation of British colonisers and local people's life. These stories are set in Malaya and Borneo, which Maugham visited twice in 1921 and 1925, and Conrad visited four times between 1887 and 1889. In 'Neil MacAdam', which pays a direct tribute to Conrad, the descriptions of the jungle from the view of Neil's steamer are very similar to those in *Heart of Darkness*:

Now they were steaming up the river. At the mouth was a straggling fisherman's village standing on piles on the water; on the bank grew thickly nipah palm and the tortured mangrove; beyond stretched the dense green of the virgin forest. (NM, CSS 4 516)

The thickly grown 'nipah palm and the tortured mangrove' and 'dense green of the virgin forest' bear comparison with an early episode in *Heart of Darkness* where Marlow's steamer works its way down the west coast of Africa:

The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. (Conrad 15)

Conrad obscures the glittering sea with 'a creeping mist', which Allan Simmons interprets as a projection of Marlow's personal unease onto his surroundings (27–28), but Maugham's environment is bright and clear, projecting the character's sense of freedom:

He knew his Conrad almost by heart and he was expecting a land of brooding mystery. He was not prepared for the blue milky sky. Little white clouds on the horizon, like sailing boats becalmed, shone in the sun. The green trees of the forest glittered in the brilliant light. [...] Neil had no feeling of being

shut in, nor, in that radiant morning, of gloom, but of space and freedom.

(NM, *CSS 4* 516–17)

Neil was expecting a Conradian ‘land of brooding mystery’, but what he saw was ‘blue milky sky’. Maugham’s repeated use of words like ‘shone’, ‘glitter’, ‘brilliant’ and ‘radiant’ suggests Neil’s unexpected joy. A similar paragraph from another story, ‘Force of Circumstance’, also sets up the Conradian darkness of the jungle, then reversely opens to ‘brightness’:

Of course [Doris] had read novels about the Malay Archipelago and she had formed an impression of a sombre land with great ominous rivers and a silent, impenetrable jungle. When the little coasting steamer set them down at the mouth of the river, where a large boat, manned by a dozen Dyaks, was waiting to take them to the station, her breath was taken away by the beauty, friendly rather than awe-inspiring, of the scene. It had a gaiety, like the joyful singing of birds in the trees, which she had never expected. On each bank of the river were mangroves and nipah palms, and behind them the dense green of the forest. In the distance stretched blue mountains, range upon range, as far as the eye could see. She had no sense of confinement nor of gloom, but rather of openness and wide spaces where the exultant fancy could wander with delight. (FC, *CSS 2* 52)

The first sentence sets up the Conradian darkness of the ‘sombre land’, ‘great ominous rivers’ and ‘a silent, impenetrable jungle’, but the second sentence leads to a new light. Malay residents vaguely appear, and Doris feels her spirit ‘could wander with delight’. The ‘gaiety’ of the environment and the ‘joyful singing of birds’ constitute a pathetic fallacy, reflecting Doris’s happiness. The environment is also an external image of Doris’s husband Guy’s character, a “gay, jolly little man” (FC, *CSS 2* 47). These positive feelings reverse the Conradian narrative of ominous threat and undermine readers’ expectations.

Similar descriptions of the Eastern environment, full of brightness, beauty and tranquillity, are also evident in the uncolonised rural area in China in *The Painted Veil*:

The morning drew on and the sun touched the mist so that it shone whitely like the ghost of snow on a dying star. Though on the river it was light so that you could discern palely the lines of the crowded junks and the thick forest of their masts, in front of it was a shining wall the eye could not pierce. But suddenly from that white cloud a tall, grim, and massive bastion emerged. It seemed not merely to be made visible by the all-discovering sun but rather to rise out of nothing at the touch of a magic wand. (*PV* 80)

And the bright colours of a peaceful moat in Burma and Burmese people's clothes:

In the broad water of the moat the rosy wall and the thick foliage of the trees and the Burmese in their bright clothes are sharply reflected. The water is still, but not stagnant, and peace rests upon it like a swan with a golden crown. Its colours, in the early morning and towards sunset, have the soft fatigued tenderness of pastel; they have the translucency, without the stubborn definiteness, of oils. It is as though light were a prestidigitator and in play laid on colour that he had just created and were about with a careless hand to wash them out again. (*GP* 28–29)

The 'darkness' in Maugham's Eastern stories is a metonym for white settlers' dark humanity. Maugham's best-known short story 'Rain' reveals the hypocrisy of an English missionary, Reverend Davidson, who is pretentious in morally educating a prostitute, Sadie Thompson, but to whom he himself falls prey. The story is told from Dr Macphail's perspective, the doctor who boarded the same ship as Davidson and was cast out to the island of Pago-Pago. Maugham critiques the Christian hypocrisy through irony: it is not Miss Thompson's soul that needs to be cleansed, but the corrupt missionary's.

In the middle of the story, there is a passage describing the rain:

And Dr Macphail watched the rain. It was beginning to get on his nerves. It was not like our soft English rain that drops gently on the earth; it was unmerciful and somehow terrible; you felt in it the malignancy of the primitive powers of nature. It did not pour, it flowed. It was like a deluge from heaven, and it rattled on the roof of corrugated iron with a steady persistence that was maddening. It seemed to have a fury of its own. And sometimes you felt that you must scream if it did not stop, and then suddenly you felt powerless, as though your bones had suddenly become soft; and you were miserable and hopeless. (R, *CSS* 1 26)

If we understand Maugham's metonymic strategy in his depiction of man and nature, then this paragraph is highly symbolic. It seems to describe the rain, but every sentence about the 'unmerciful and somehow terrible' rain reveals Davidson's sexual desire, through Dr Macphail's limited perspective and free indirect speech. Then, the 'malignancy of the primitive powers of nature' actually speaks of human nature. Davidson's primitive desire is repressed in his Christian mission, a by-product of imperialism. Maugham's swift shift to a second-person perspective has a similar effect as Conrad's literary impressionism, known for describing an environment through a character's sensory perceptions. Here, readers are brought into Dr Macphail's perspective and share his sensory experience of the rain: 'You' hear the rain rattling on the roof and feel overwhelmed and powerless. The last sentence suggests that humans are subject to their desires, which causes misery.

The ending of the story has a similar effect as Conrad's 'delayed decoding'. Ian Watt famously explains that "delayed decoding is the process of giving the sense impression before its consequent naming: presenting the raw, uninterpreted, immediate sense-impressions before the abstraction, the blunt word, and the holistic picture" (Warodell 75). 'Delayed decoding' constructs a lag between the character's sensory impressions and his understanding of what happened: "readers are just as much in the dark about what is

occurring as is the character Marlow” (Peters 7). Maugham doesn’t directly use ‘delayed decoding’ through describing slow and detailed perceptions, like Conrad describes Marlow witnessing the arrows,<sup>53</sup> but ‘Rain’ does not reveal the reason for Reverend Davidson’s suicide until the last two lines, when Sadie Thompson returned to her old costume and spoke to Dr Macphail: “You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You’re all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!” (R, *CSS 1* 48). On almost every page, readers feel the rain through Dr Macphail’s senses. The ending brings a ‘delayed’ but powerful revelation of the destructive effect of human desires.

Maugham’s symbol of rain also appears in ‘Neil MacAdam’, a tragedy of marginalised sexuality, probably homosexuality that was prohibited by law in English society. Maugham alludes to Alfred Wallace’s *Malay Archipelago*, a book that Neil had been reading since boyhood (NM, *CSS 4* 515) and whose author had a homosexual relationship with a Malay boy (Clement 164). Like Wallace, Neil is characterised as a qualified naturalist and sexually inexperienced young man, with androgynous appearance. He has white, smooth skin which “would have been a beautiful skin even for a woman”, and he intends to remain a virgin until his marriage (NM, *CSS 4* 515–17). As the story goes on, Darya, the wife of the Curator Mr Munro, falls in love with Neil and attempts to seduce him. Neil flees, leaving Darya alone in the jungle knowing that she will get lost and die. Mark Clement points out that Maugham’s irony is that the trained naturalist is indeed inept in dealing with a basic dimension of human nature, namely, sexuality (184). The story ends in a heavy rain that ruins everything in the jungle: “The rain pelted in fierce torrents. Rocks and gigantic trees came tumbling down the mountain. The tumult was awful” (NM, *CSS 4* 562), symbolising Neil’s sexuality, unspeakable and horrible in his English mindset. The real

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<sup>53</sup> An example of ‘delayed decoding’: “Sticks, little sticks, were flying about – thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet – perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove!” (Conrad *Heart of Darkness*, Part 2).

object of Neil's affections is Mr Munro, the scientific mentor in the museum whom Neil admired greatly (Holden "Colonizing Masculinity" 201). The story ends with Mr Munro's 'delayed' understanding of what happened: he "flung himself down wearily", his face "tired and white and anguished", murmuring "Poor child. Poor child" (NM, CSS 4 563). In both stories, 'Rain' set in Pago-Pago and 'Neil MacAdam' set in the Malay Archipelago, the seemingly Conradian 'dark' environment is Maugham's strategic metonymy of human nature, distorted by the British discourse of imperialism and masculinity. The repressed humanity comes to the surface in an Eastern setting. It is the characters' confinement in their British mindset that leads to the tragic ending, not the environment itself.

This section began by addressing three problems in existing postcolonial readings of Maugham's Eastern stories. It investigated Eastern modernity as intellectual resistance and cross-cultural exchange: Maugham's internalised imperialist critique led him to a conversation with a Chinese philosopher, who was then fictionalised in Maugham's play. Maugham's Eastern environment was compared with that of Conrad, through a modernist reading, observing that Maugham's East is inherently bright, with Westerners bringing darkness to it. Maugham's Western character and Eastern environment are mutually metonymic, showing the possibility of integrating the two rather than treating them as 'self and other'. The East, then, becomes Maugham's method to distance himself from Western civilisation, critically reflect on it, and to continue his criticism of English society and transnational quest explored in *Of Human Bondage*.

### **Belated Community**

This final section examines Maugham's characterisation of colonial officers in the expatriate community, producing a collage of concepts of home and not-home, belatedness and simultaneity. Maugham plays with the idea of British nationalism in his depiction of colonisers, often isolated and desperately lonely: as Eddie Tay comments, they are

“psychologically crippled victims of an imperialist ideology” (48). Inspired by Tay’s insights on belatedness in his book chapter ‘The Exhaustion of Colonial Romance’ (2010), this section analyses the ‘belated community’ in Maugham’s Eastern fiction and their nostalgia for British national pride. This section will conclude with Maugham’s outspoken mockery of the pretentious formation of British narratives of colonial history, by revealing the unjust and hollow logic of imperialism, in parallel with his previous conversation with the Chinese philosopher.

Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy have each proposed theories on community. Anderson put forward his ‘imagined communities’ to “offer some tentative suggestions for a more satisfactory interpretation of the ‘anomaly’ of nationalism” (4), while Nancy’s ‘inoperative community’ originally targeted communism, dismantling Marx’s ‘immanence’ of communities. Their theories can be applied to Maugham’s expatriate community in colonies, as a collective, “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). Nancy views individuals as singularities confined in their own limits, and the moment of ecstasy, “exposure of singularities” to the outside is constitutive of a plurality (Nancy 30). Nancy’s community is relational, as non-absoluteness, only existing in the “being-ecstatic of Being itself” (Nancy 6). Then, “our belief, our knowledge, our discourses, and our poems derive from these,” become “myth” (Nancy 44). In Maugham’s colonial setting, the essence of his expatriate communities, or Englishness, as an extension of sovereignty in England, is imagined, and the empire narratives are only ‘myth’. The white characters are pathetic outcasts, cut off from the time and space in Britain, struggling to maintain the illusion of synchronicity with their home country through books and newspapers, and reflecting a belated nostalgia for the British glory. Novels and newspapers are examples of what Anderson called print capitalism. The English book is what Homi Bhabha finds a “metonymy of authoritative texts” and “an insignia of colonial authority” (145). Through these print texts, Maugham’s characters exist in an isolated space and “homogenous empty

time” (Anderson 194). This rethinking of time and space will lead to Maugham’s revelation that colonial histories are myths rather than authorities, in his imagined conversation in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* with the fictitious author of *Decline and Fall of the British Empire*.

Maugham’s short story ‘The Door of Opportunity’ is a counter-narrative to the empire-builder myth, following a reverse adventure structure. It features a highbrow and self-conceited Englishman, Alban Torel, who has a refined appearance: “fair hair”, “blue eyes”, “a long neck”, “a somewhat prominent Adam’s apple” (DO, CSS 4 496–97). He and his wife Anne enjoy highbrow hobbies such as piano, literature, and modern paintings. However, Alban is enclosed in his singularity and fails in the duty expected by his community. The opening scene describes the Torel couple returning defeated to London from Daktar, the most isolated district in (fictional) Sondurah in the Federal Malay States, following Alban’s dismissal from the position of District Officer. He had refused to deal with a group of local communist rioters who killed Prynne, the manager of a rubber estate, and set the estate in flames, leaving Prynne’s native wife and children in danger: “I’m not going to risk my life and my policemen’s for the sake of a native woman and her half-caste brats” (DO, CSS 4 516). He continues, “If the officers of this Government had hesitated to take unjustifiable risks it would never have become a province of the British Empire” (DO, CSS 4 524). The Governor suggests that Alban resign, which he refuses to do. As a result, he is dismissed causing his wife to be filled with resentment. Ironically, Alban is dismissed because of his colonialist mindset, pride and self-conceit which are encoded in the greatness of the British Empire. This paradox points to the “impossibility of its own immanence” and therefore, “the impossibility of community,” as Nancy writes (15).

The motive of Alban’s heroic, or anti-heroic action is unknown, like Merville’s scrivener Bartleby’s repeated assertion “I would prefer not to”. We know from his wife Anne’s perspective that Alban is despised by other men in the English club, but he doesn’t care. Nancy suggests that each individual is a ‘singularity’; communication happens in what

he calls as ‘ecstasy’, a term denoting a moment when one being ‘exposes’ itself to others and the world, so the being transcends its singularity and enters the relationship with others. Alban’s self-conceited character only ‘exposes’ itself in a relational context, in his interactions with other people. Nancy’s concept of *partage*, which can be translated as both ‘sharing’ and ‘division’, explains Alban and his wife’s relationship: “These singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing [*partage*], they are distributed and placed, or rather *spaced*, by the sharing that makes them *others*” (Nancy 25). Real communication doesn’t happen. Alban and Anne share highbrow interests but remain ‘other’ to one another because they have different expectations of the colonial community imagined by themselves. The final scene of the story describes how the despairing Anne rushes out of the ‘door’ and leaves Alban alone, symbolising the end of his ‘opportunity’ of being loved and promoted to Governor as his wife expected.

In ‘The Force of Circumstance’, Guy and his wife Doris also *partage* with each other. Their happy life in Kuala Solor, Sembulu,<sup>54</sup> is interrupted by the appearance of a Malay woman, who is “slight and small, with the large, dark, starry eyes of her race and a mass of raven hair” in contrast to Doris who is “cool and fresh” with “neat and glossy” dark short hair “and fine brown eyes (FC, CSS 2 51, 54). Guy finally finds the courage to tell Doris that, out of extreme loneliness, he once lived with this Malay woman for ten years and fathered her children:

“It’s awfully lonely on an outstation. Why, often one doesn’t see another white man for six months on end. A fellow comes out here when he’s only a boy.” (FC, CSS 2 51)

To relieve the nineteen-year-old Guy’s loneliness, his boy brought him a native girl. On the day the girl came, the image of rain reappears: “It had been raining all day and I hadn’t been able to get any exercise” (FC, CSS 2 61–62). Like most white men would do in outposts, he

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<sup>54</sup> Maugham models fictional Sembulu on Kuching, the capital of Sarawak.

let her stay. Doris is overwhelmed by the “physical nausea” of thinking “those thin black arms of hers” around Guy (FC, CSS 2 71), and after six months of torment decides to leave. Using a psychoanalytic lens, Janoory and Muhammad argue that Doris’s unmarried widow mother has cultivated Doris’s strong sense of fidelity and fear of betrayal (714, 16). The couple ‘share’ their community but meanwhile are ‘spaced’ from each other. Guy grew up in Sembulu, following his father’s colonial service for the second Sultan, while Doris grew up in England with her mother. Guy subconsciously feels more attached to the East:

“After all England’s a foreign land to me,” he told her. “My home is Sembulu.” (FC, CSS 2 48)

Doris is more attached to her English identity. She says to Guy, “You belong to them. You don’t belong to me” (FC, CSS 2 71). Their communication is “the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity” (Nancy 29), but at once, they are detached and distanced, in this case by Guy’s dissolved national identity. A symbolic river flows by, when Guy reveals his relationship with the Malay woman:

At their feet, with a mighty, formidable sluggishness, silent, mysterious and fatal, flowed the river. It had the terrible deliberation and the relentlessness of destiny. (FC, CSS 2 59)

The river flows slowly but powerfully, “with a mighty, formidable sluggishness”, just like the thirty years that reshape Guy’s national identity. The river image is highly symbolic and expressionistic, alluding to the slow but transformative ‘force of circumstance’, revealing that the English identity Guy thought he belonged to has already gone.

Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an ‘imagined community’, which is ‘inherently limited and sovereign’, can be applied to Maugham’s expatriate community, where individuals hold onto the idea of Great Britain as nation. It “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”

(Anderson 7). It is imagined as *limited*, in Maugham's stories, to isolated space and time. It is imagined as *sovereign* because the expatriates believe they have sovereignty over the colony. Finally, it is imagined as a *community*: in the English clubs, white men find their fraternity. Maugham's stories take place at the ruptures of the community: the expatriates do not belong to the same social background in England, have a very weak connection with the English identity after long-term isolation, and do not know of significant social changes in their home country.

Anderson's 'imagined communities' are constructed on the emergence of "the novel and the newspaper", two forms to re-present the simultaneous activities of any nation's fellow citizens, which would constitute their past, present and future (Anderson 25). In Maugham's Eastern stories, English books and newspapers constantly appear, usually with a time lag, suggesting the irony that expatriates are not at home but 'imagine' to be at home. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues about the metonymic function of English books and its belatedness: "The discovery of the English book establishes both a measure of mimesis and a mode of civil authority and order" (Bhabha 152); he continues, "What is 'English' in these discourses of colonial power cannot be represented as a plenitudinous presence; it is determined by its belatedness" (Bhabha 153). The immediate presence of English books engages with the questions of authority, such as race, sexuality and violence in colonial history. Maugham's short story 'The Book-bag' features an English narrator who travels everywhere with "the largest sack made for carrying soiled linen and filling it to the brim with books to suit every possible occasion and every mood" (B, CSS 4 6). His conversation with Mark Featherstone, the Acting Resident in Tenggarah near Penang, gradually unfolds the incestuous love between Tim Hardy and his sister Olive who suicided after Tim's marriage. The story alludes to *Life of Byron* and *Twelfth Night*, both concerning the brother-sister connection. The book-bag that "stood upright, bulging oddly" and looked like "a humpbacked gnome" (B, CSS 4 9-10) poses an irony of Englishness, revealing

degenerate humanity rather than colonial authority, and questions English authority. The tragedy bears comparison with André Gide's *Strait is the Gate* (1909), where the boy-and-cousin's love is impeded by religious contemplation. Maugham's book-bag that always accompanies the narrator symbolises that the civil code of Englishness always follows him, to judge what happened around him, and follows everyone wherever they travel.

Apart from books, Maugham's English characters morbidly read newspapers, which according to Anderson are an "extreme form" of the book, sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity (34). Maugham's expatriate characters wish to live synchronically with their compatriots in England, always waiting for the newspaper that arrives weeks after its 'ephemeral popularity' and ironically becomes outdated news. For example, in 'The Force of Circumstance', Doris and Guy read "the English papers"; in 'Footprints in the Jungle', the ladies in the club read "old numbers of the *Illustrated London News*" (FC, CSS 2 461). In 'The Outstation', there is a farcical scene where Warburton, the British Resident in Kuala Solor in Sembulu, reads the *Times* but each issue reaches him six weeks after publication. He suffers from the same loneliness as Guy: "For three years during the war I never saw a white man" and develops a secret "deep love" for Sembulu and its native people (FC, CSS 2 409, 416–17):

He had a genuine tenderness for them. But he never forgot that he was an English gentleman, and he had no patience with the white men who yielded to native customs. He made no surrenders. (O, CSS 4 417).

Warburton keeps an English gentleman's lifestyle: his room is "as neatly laid out as if he had an English valet"; he has formal dinner in a formal suit "in a boiled shirt and a high collar, silk socks and patent-leather shoes" when he is alone, and the dinner is sumptuous, with the menu written in French and the dishes bearing resounding names (O, CSS 4 408–10). This dinner scene parallels with Maugham's short story 'The Taipan' set in Hong Kong: he "always dressed" alone to have "a set dinner with soup and fish, entrée, roast,

sweet and savoury” (T, *OCS* 123). Warburton was “a figure in the society of London in the early nineties” back in England (O, *CSS* 4 413) while the taipan comes from a modest family, “a little red house in a long row of little red houses, in Barnes, a suburb” (T, *OCS* 122–23). Their Englishness is a condition of exile, only preserved in their memories of the past, and precludes them from belonging to any imagined community, even a community of exiles. Warburton’s six-week-late English newspaper is a tie to civilisation, giving him “the illusion of living at home” (O, *CSS* 4 425). He reads the newspaper column that records births, deaths, and marriages, and keeps a busy correspondence with great ladies, preparing letters of congratulation or condolence (O, *CSS* 4 415–16). Ironically, he will never be simultaneous with them in time and space. He is out of place in his imagined community.

Warburton is disillusioned by his ungentlemanly new assistant Cooper,<sup>55</sup> a coarse young man who was born and educated in Barbados in the Caribbean. Seeing Cooper come to dinner in “the kahki shorts, the kahki shirt, and the ragged jacket in which he had landed”, Mr Warburton’s smile of greeting “froze on his face” and he taught Cooper if they dine together “it is only polite to wear the costume usual in civilized society” (O, *CSS* 4 409–10). Cooper calls Warburton “a snob”, and the Sultan’s representative writes that “You must remember that times have changed” (O, *CSS* 4 433). Similar descriptions of ungentlemanly colonisers can be found in ‘The Door of Opportunity’ and ‘Mackintosh’, suggesting that the perks of being a gentleman are gone; highbrow people cannot triumph in this world, only the brash can. Warburton who has been isolated for twenty years does not understand the social and cultural transformations of English society.

Mr Warburton felt on a sudden discouraged with life. The world of which he was a part had passed away and the future belonged to a meaner generation.

Cooper represented it and Cooper he hated with all his heart. (O, *CSS* 4 433)

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<sup>55</sup> Even their names give the game away: Warburton is a noble name whilst Cooper represents a kind of trade industry. The surname Warburton may allude to William Warburton, an eighteenth-century theologian and editor of Shakespeare, or Lord Warburton in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*.

At the end of the story, Cooper is killed by his boy servant and Warburton continues to live in his illusion of being a part of his imagined community. In Maugham's South Seas story, 'Mackintosh', the socially superior officer Walker is killed. Mackintosh does not understand Walker's love for the Samoan people up to his death: "Forgive them. I've loved them, you know, always loved them" (M, *CSS 1* 208), leading to Mackintosh's suicide out of remorse using the gun that kills Walker at the end of the story. These stories, set in different time and space, ranging from Hong Kong ('The Taipan', 1919), the South Seas ('Mackintosh', 1920), Federated Malay States including Sarawak in North Borneo ('The Force of Circumstance', 1924) and fictional Sondurah on the Malay Peninsula ('The Door of Opportunity', 1931, with oblique reference to Chinese rebellions), reflect Maugham's depiction of imagined communities of Englishmen in different locations of the East.

In the final chapter of *Imagined Communities*, 'Memory and Forgetting', Anderson discusses "History, or rather History emplotted in particular ways" (197). He argues that the eventual print form of national narratives is the history book, which is selective in nature to shape how the future generations of a nation remember and forget its violence. Anderson calls history "a vast pedagogical industry" and reveals the unmentioned fratricide between the Norman and Saxon nations in English history:

English history textbooks offer the diverting spectacle of a great Founding Father whom every schoolchild is taught to call – William the Conqueror. The same child is not informed that William spoke no English, indeed could not have done so, since the English language did not exist in his epoch; nor is he or she told 'Conqueror of what'. For the only intelligible modern answer would have told 'Conqueror of the English,' which would turn the old Norman predator into a more successful precursor of Napoleon and Hitler. Hence 'the Conqueror' operates as the same kind of ellipsis as 'la Saint-Barthélemy,' to remind one of something which it is immediately obligatory

to forget. Norman William and Saxon Harold thus meet on the battlefield of Hastings, if not as dancing partners, at least as brothers. (Anderson 201)

The narratives of history, like novels and newspapers, are set in a 'homogenous, empty time'. The pride and glory of the English nation, or Englishness, is selected and written by the historians; what hasn't been written will be forgotten. Maugham is critical of the writing and formation of British history. In an early chapter of *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, he refers to the authoritative history book, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and imagines the following conversation about what the fictional author of *Decline and Fall of the British Empire* would say to him after reading his book:

It is true that should the historian of the *Decline and Fall of the British Empire* come across this book on the shelves of some public library he will have hard things to say of me. [...] for when all is said and done he will have a subject upon which he may well expend all his pains: the British Empire will have been in the world's history a moment not without grandeur. (GP 12–14)

What will the future historian say about the fall of the British Empire? Who will write the reasons for its fall? Maugham's three-page long passage sets up three stereotyped explanations for the fall of the British Empire and then dismantles them. He characterises the historian as a superficial reader who does not understand his works but accuses him of producing "a book that can be of no value to the historian, the political economist or the philosopher: it is deservedly forgotten" (GP 13). Maugham's tone is very ironical here. The historian criticises Maugham for not noticing the reasons for the empire's fall. Maugham's implied reply is: 'I did. I don't want to argue with you.' The last sentence in the excerpt above, which is often misunderstood, is susceptible to postcolonial critique because the 'grandeur' of the British Empire is *imagined* by the fictional historian, of whom Maugham disapproves. Postcolonial interpretations that assert Maugham "does not question" but "endorses the institution of imperialism" (Chaudhary 26) misread this key point.

Maugham's logic of criticising the fictional historian corresponds to Gu Hongming's lines in *On a Chinese Screen*. The following three paragraphs analyse the stereotypes associated with the fall of empire and position Maugham's critique in this passage in parallel with 'The Philosopher'.

The first stereotype: the British Empire falls because its people lack courage. The fictitious historian accuses Maugham for not noticing "what a nerveless hand the British held the power that their fathers had conquered" (*GP* 12) and his derision in "the spectacle of a horde of officials who held their positions only by force of the guns behind them trying to persuade the races they ruled that they were there only on sufferance" (*GP* 12). The message is that to conquer is never an act of courage, but an atrocity. The British people have no courage but only the force of guns. Maugham is criticised as his position is closer to that of the Chinese philosopher: "Then why does the white man despise the yellow? Shall I tell you? Because he has invented the machine-gun. That is your superiority" ("The Philosopher", *OCS* 153).

The second stereotype: the Empire brought 'efficiency' and 'benefits' to the East. "They offered efficiency to people to whom a hundred other things were of more consequence and sought to justify themselves by the benefits they conferred on people who did not want them" (*GP* 12). The implied meaning is that Eastern people have the capacity and justification to rule; what the British Empire brought is something they did not want. Maugham perhaps formulated this idea from Confucianism and Gu Hongming's saying that the British Empire has shattered Chinese philosophers' dream that "the world could be governed by the power of law and order" ("The Philosopher", *OCS* 153).

The third stereotype: the British Empire falls because the later generation of colonisers condescend to the colonised. "What had happened to the race that had produced Clive, Warren Hastings and Stamford Raffles that it must send out to its colonies men who were afraid of the authority entrusted to them, men who thought to rule the Oriental by

cajolery and submissiveness, by being unobtrusive, by pocketing affronts and giving the natives powers they were unfit to use and must inevitably turn against their masters” (*GP* 13). Maugham points out that the colonisers’ “conscience is troubled because he is a master” (*GP* 13). This is repeatedly seen in Maugham’s Eastern fiction in his characterisation of conscience-troubled colonial officers such as Warburton and Mackintosh, and this logic is evidently drawn from the previous two counter-stereotypes: the coloniser’s conscience is troubled because they use the machine-gun to impose what the colonised do not want. In ‘The Philosopher’, Gu Hongming imagines that British superiority would not exist if Chinese people also ruled by force: “Do you think it will take us long to learn? And what will become of your superiority when the yellow man can make as good guns as the white and fire them as straight? You have appealed to the machine gun and by the machine gun shall you be judged” (“The Philosopher”, *OCS* 153–54).

In this lengthy passage, Maugham mocks the future historian responsible for “fashioning” (Anderson 205) the ‘grandeur’ of the British Empire. This fashioning of history, marked by deaths and violence, is embedded in “an ordinary present”, in a way of “forgetting” the continuity of secular, serial time (Anderson 205). What Maugham did in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* is to resist forgetting, to remind the future readers of the unmentionable, atrocious past in colonial history. Maugham’s British colonisers are “sentimentalists” (*GP* 13), troubled by their conscience and desires like those in his fiction, not the people of the proud and honourable British nation that would be fashioned in history narratives. Maugham writes, “I venture to express the wish that when the time comes for him to write this great work he will write it with sympathy, justice and magnanimity” (*GP* 13–14), implying that colonisers are, after all, human beings, not just a part of the empire.

### **Conclusion: Influence on Orwell**

My chapter concludes by examining Maugham's influence on George Orwell in style, theme, and imperialist critique, to demonstrate the continuation of Maugham's global modernism and to balance the postcolonial comparisons of the two. George Orwell, who "had been reading Maugham since boyhood" (*SMAL* 304), was heavily influenced by Maugham's Eastern fictions. Jeffrey Meyers, the biographer of both Maugham and Orwell, notes that Orwell "rejected Kipling's imperialist creed and was far more in tune with Maugham's view of the East" and that his *Burmese Days* "most clearly shows Maugham's impact" (*SMAL* 427). From 1922 to 1927, Orwell served with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, during which time Maugham was travelling extensively in East, South, and Southeast Asia. In an essay written in 1940, Orwell writes: "I believe the modern writer who has influenced me most is Somerset Maugham, whom I admire immensely for his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills" (*CE* 24). Another biographer of Orwell, Gordon Bowker observed that Maugham's "'The Vice Consul' (from *On a Chinese Screen*, 1922), clearly inspired his essay 'A Hanging', and *Ashenden* (1928) was one of the models he took (along with Swift's *A Modest Proposal*) in working to perfect his own 'windowpane' style of prose" (Bowker). Jeffrey Meyers commented that Orwell's first novel *Burmese Days* "most clearly shows Maugham's impact" (*SMAL* 427). In his biography of Orwell, Meyers traces Orwell's painful childhood symbolised in the "hideous birthmark of Flory in *Burmese Days*" (*Orwell Life and Art* 6), resonating with Maugham's early experiences and Philip Carey's club foot in *Of Human Bondage*.

*Burmese Days* inherits Maugham's representation of the bright Eastern environment: "Beyond the club, the Irrawaddy flowed huge and ochreous, glittering like diamonds in the patches that caught the sun; and beyond the river stretched great wastes of paddy fields, ending at the horizon in a range of blackish hills" (Orwell *BD* 18). Maugham describes a similar scene: "The sun set on the other side of the river, and a red cloud in the west was reflected on the tranquil bosom of the Irrawaddy" (*GP* 19–20). Both passages describe the

sunlit river and then stretch to distance describing civilisation: the paddy fields, the fisherman, and the pagoda. The Burmese life along the Irrawaddy gradually unfolds, contrasting with Conrad's depopulated jungle and unspoken horror.

*Burmese Days* contrasts two places: the town and the jungle. As Douglas Kerr writes, "the town is basically the site of European life"; the jungle is authentically Burmese, a metonym for Burma itself" (Kerr 40). The town is represented by the whites-only club, which John Flory dislikes and "break[s] the rules occasionally" (Orwell *BD* 124), and doesn't feel he belongs to. "He had no tie with Europe now, except the tie of books" (*BD* 72). The Europeans see the jungle as a dangerous place, but Flory takes solitary walks in the jungle as an escape from the awfulness of the town and finds a sense of belonging there (Kerr 42–43). The irony is that Flory works as a timber merchant and is supposed to convert the jungle into saleable commodities. To enlarge this irony, Flory feels more at home in Burma than in England. This is similar to Maugham's character Guy in 'The Force of Circumstance', who feels that Sembulu is his home.

This country which he hated was now his native country, his home. He had lived here ten years, and every particle of his body was compounded of Burmese soil. Scenes like these – the sallow evening light, the old Indian cropping grass, the creak of the cartwheels, the streaming egrets – were more native to him than England. He had sent deep roots, perhaps his deepest, into a foreign country. (Orwell *BD* 71–72)

The ending of *Burmese Days* with Flory's suicide is powerful as it shows the colonial system is inherently unresolvable, similar to Maugham's endings where the marginalised character suicides with a gun, such as in *The Hero* and 'The Alien Corn'. As Meyers writes, Flory is a misfit "unable to mediate between the three worlds of Burma: the English, the 'native' and the natural world of the jungle" (Meyers *A Reader's Guide to George Orwell* 69–70). The novel, through Flory's tragedy, launches Orwell's radical critique of colonialism.

Orwell's non-fiction, such as 'Shooting an Elephant' (1936) and 'A Hanging' (1931), also blur the boundary between fact and fiction (we don't know whether Orwell really shot the elephant); and his close observations of the elephant and the prisoner are as sympathetic and moving as Maugham's descriptions of the Chinese coolies. "He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone – one mind less, one world less" ("AH"). Orwell's autobiographical narrator, the elephant-shooter "had no intention of shooting the elephant" but did it against his conscience ("SE"). He is more radical in writing "I did not even know that the British Empire *is* dying" ("SE").

In summary, Maugham inherited themes and literary devices such as irony, frame narrative, themes, and imagery from Conrad, and experimented with his own literary exploration. He viewed the East as a place free from social obligations and mocked those colonisers who clung to the English traditions. Maugham adopted a more lucid writing style, different from Conrad, which in turn heavily influenced George Orwell. Positioning Maugham between these two canonical writers adds complexity to this somewhat marginalised writer and demonstrates how the mode of Englishness is dissolved in Maugham's narrative, highlighting his subtle yet sharp critique of traditions and the colonial system. This lays the foundation for Maugham's modernism and prepares for his avid reading of and reflections on Eastern philosophy – Daoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism – with its literary representations analysed in my other chapters.

## Chapter Three

### Representing the Unsayable: The Art of Silence

“He did not answer for a minute. His gaze rested on the passing throng, but I do not think he saw it.  
His answer was no answer.”

W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence*, 1919

“[...] Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.”

T. S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton,’ Part 1 of *Four Quartets*, 1941

“There is a true meaning in all of these,  
But when I try to explain, I forget my words.”

Tao Qian (365-427), ‘Drinking Wine’ (the Fifth)<sup>56</sup>

#### Introduction: Literary Impressionism

Let me start this chapter with a personal note. In August 2023, during my archival research in the Library of Congress reading Maugham’s unpublished manuscript ‘The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey’, I visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Casually turning around, I saw Claude Monet’s famous painting, ‘Woman with a Parasol – Madame Monet and Her Son’, directly facing me in two-yard distance. I was immediately moved to tears. The light and shadows, the tender strokes, the dreamy atmosphere, and the painter’s intimate emotions, altogether preserved that loving moment in this eternal masterpiece. Among the floating wisps of white clouds, Madame Monet turned around, across the veil of time on her face, smiling to me. I was engaging all my

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<sup>56</sup> Translation from Longxi Zhang, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. Duke University Press, 2012, p.124.

senses to remember the details of that beautiful moment.



Figure 12. Claude Monet, *Woman with a Parasol – Madame Monet and Her Son*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Photo taken by the author, 6 August 2023, the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C.

That trip was, in fact, my first travel overseas from Sydney. Coming from a culturally conservative and economically underdeveloped background, I did not have access to Art or Music classes at school. At nine or ten, I signed up for an extracurricular art class and always sat with the palette, plaster models, and fruit plates on weekends, practising painting. I learned to capture light and shadow on canvas. I learned to be attentive to details. Above all, I learned that painting is silent poetry. It bypasses language and touches the human heart directly. Water colour, oil, pencil, ink... no matter its medium, painting eternalises time, sublimating ordinary objects into art. Painting *is* poetry.

At the Museum of Fine Arts, standing in front of Paul Gauguin's masterpiece *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, I shivered with exultation at its enigmatic nature and profound inquiry into human existence. I followed the caption to 'read' the painting from right to left. It felt intimidating, like an oracle that resists deciphering. Then I remembered this painting was fictionalised in Maugham's novel *The Moon and Sixpence* as the mural embodying Strickland's eventual artistic expression.

This chapter argues that Maugham's appreciation for Western and Chinese art cultivated his modernist method of literary impressionism, undoing the binary distinction between transcendence and presence. Daoist philosophy, which sustains the 'suggestive' aesthetic of Chinese painting, provides Maugham's Western characters a path to liberation and toward achieving spiritual freedom. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Paris chapters in *Of Human Bondage*, based on Maugham's experiences of learning painting in Paris in 1904-05, can be read as a modernist moment of rebellion, marking a significant departure from realism and the increased mediation of aesthetics in Maugham's writing and depiction of character. Later, his journey to China (1919-1920) enabled Maugham to appreciate Chinese art and further experiment with his modernist narrative strategies. Following these two lines of thought, this chapter, on the one hand, traces Maugham's characterisation of Charles Strickland as a Post-Impressionist painter in *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919); on the

other hand, it examines Maugham's encounter with Chinese art such as calligraphy, painting, and architecture in his travel notes *On a Chinese Screen* (1922). Maugham's understanding of concepts in Chinese aesthetics, of 'emptiness' and 'suggestion,' is evident in his novel *The Painted Veil* (1925), fusing Daoism, Chinese landscapes, and the Western character's spiritual progress.

In Chapter Two, I introduced Conrad's literary impressionism and how Maugham uses similar techniques in his short stories such as 'delayed decoding,' presenting the character's subjective, sensory, raw, and slowly unfolding impressions of the external world. These pictorial descriptions of landscape and fleeting sensations have similar effects in literature as impressionist techniques in painting. Jess Matz's *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (2001) views literary impressionism as a modernist aesthetic that mediates "between human reason and alien nature, between the forms of thought and the content of the world" (Matz 11). As an 'impression,' fiction is nothing very certain but "*mediates* opposite perceptual moments" – fragments suggest wholes, surfaces suggest depths – impressionist fiction devotes itself to the "undoing of such distinctions" (Matz 1). Matz exemplifies how impressionism undoes basic oppositions in modernist fiction: through the use of 'impression,' Henry James joins *contingency* and *freedom*, Conrad combines *sensation* and *perception*; Proust unites *invention* and *description*; for Ford, the terms are *fact* and *value*; and for Woolf, the impression integrates *experience* and *essence* (Matz 30–32).

Ancient Chinese philosophy and aesthetics undo basic binaries from the beginning. The essence of Daoism was formulated by Laozi and Zhuangzi (the latter lived toward the end of the fourth century B.C.). *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, proposes in Chapter Two:

Being and Non-Being engender one another.

Hard and Easy complete each other.

Long and Short generate each other.

Melody and Harmony resonate with each other. (Laozi 8)

In Chapter Forty, Laozi observes how Dao constantly but gently turns things to their opposites. In the Daoist cosmology, the origin of the universe is designated as ‘non-being’ (*wu* 無), which generates ‘being’ (*you* 有) and the myriad things of the world:

Turning is the Motion of the Tao,

Its Practice is Soft.

In All-under-Heaven the Myriad Things are born from Being.

Being is Born from Non-Being. (Laozi 142)

In *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting* (1991), Francois Cheng focuses on the principle of ‘emptiness’ (*xu* 虛), a Daoist idea interconnected with ‘non-being’ at the centre of Chinese painting. The opposite of ‘emptiness’ is ‘fullness’ (*shi* 實). Cheng views ‘emptiness’ as the “principal theme in Chinese aesthetic thought” (61) that enables things to attain fullness. In Chinese landscape (*shanshui*) painting, emptiness, represented by clouds or unpainted areas, circulates between mountains and waters, breaking the rigid opposition between the two. Therefore, Chinese landscape painting has a similar effect to Impressionist painting: “With emptiness as intermediary, the painter creates the impression that the mountain could virtually enter the emptiness and melt down into waves, and that inversely, the water, by way of the emptiness, could rise up into a mountain” (Cheng 37).

The influence of Impressionism and Daoism on modern literature suggests the potential for poetic expression to overcome the limits of language. Modern linguists generally believe that verbal natural language often fails in precision. For example, Bertrand Russell writes: “When one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another person means by it” (cited in Warodell 73). As for writers, Conrad speaks of the unreliability of language: “Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit” (cited in Warodell 73). Poets such as Rainer Maria Rilke and T. S. Eliot “desire to

give their vision an appropriate poetic form” but become frustrated by “their awareness that the language at their disposal is inadequate for carrying out such a mission” (Longxi Zhang *The Tao and the Logos* 73). Virginia Woolf has the same concern of language’s inadequacy of representation: “Life escapes,” she writes (“MF” 211). Woolf praises the ‘spiritual’ penetration of life over the materialists and puts forward the idea of ‘impressions’: “The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (“MF” 212). Her striking statement that “On or about December 1910 human character changed” (*MBMB* 4) is also associated with a then-recent exhibition, “Manet and the Post-Impressionists”, organized by Roger Fry, which first brought diverse works by Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh into the British horizon and stirred grand aesthetic debates.

Chinese painting, with its roots deep in ideographical writing (through calligraphy), represents nature in shorthand brushstrokes. This vivid representation of nature is similar to Pound’s and Fenollona’s understanding of the pictographic nature of Chinese written characters as discussed in Chapter One. Zhaoming Qian’s *Modernist Response to Chinese Art* examines how Chinese painting became a ‘Method’ for Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens to develop their poetics. The artistic principles of Chinese painting, such as the pursuit for ‘spiritual’ resemblance rather than mimetic concreteness and the suggestive power by leaving negative space instead of full presentation, surprisingly find parallels with Impressionist painting: only a few strokes can convey the power of abstraction and suggestion.

This chapter focuses on the use of silence, or the aesthetics of ‘emptiness’ and ‘suggestion’, in Maugham’s fiction and non-fiction. I start with the inarticulate painter who struggles to express himself through Post-Impressionist art in *The Moon and Sixpence*. Then, I examine the Chinese artifacts and the aesthetics behind them in *On a Chinese Screen*. Finally, I look at Daoism and Chinese landscape through the heroine’s ‘impressions’ in *The*

*Painted Veil*. Considering Maugham's lifelong interest in painting, his collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting and Chinese artifacts during his travels, I will read *The Moon and Sixpence* as though it is a Post-Impressionist painting and *The Painted Veil* as though it is a Chinese landscape painting.

### **Inarticulate Painter**

A celebrity in public, Maugham set clear boundaries in order to keep his privacy intact. In his old age, Maugham threw his personal correspondence into the fire and wrote to his friends to destroy his letters in their possession (Hastings 1). He issued strict instructions to his literary executors that no biography should be authorised, no access to his papers be allowed, and that all requests for information be firmly refused (Hastings 1–2). Unfortunately, within a few weeks of Maugham's death, his nephew Robin Maugham outed him as a homosexual in a mass circulation newspaper (Hastings 600). A year later, Robin Maugham published a commercially successful memoir revealing his uncle's homosexuality, betraying Maugham's wish to keep his personal matters private.

When, as is frequently the case, an 'autobiographical first-person narrator' appears in Maugham's fiction, this figure is by no means the author himself but his carefully staged public persona. He does not believe that a biography can be objective and impersonal – considering the insatiable public curiosity and the profit-driven literary market. His personal favourite among his novels, *Cakes and Ale*, revolves around a caricature of a snobbish biographer who investigates the privacy of a recently deceased famous writer to cater to the market for flattering biography. Critics observe that the writer, Edward Driffield, was a portrait of Thomas Hardy, and the biographer, Alroy Kear, was based on Hugh Walpole (Raphael 72–73). Maugham firmly rejected these conjectures. He insists that fiction should be distinguished from fact.

*The Moon and Sixpence* is a fine work of fiction woven intricately with unreliable narrative. Literary criticism that interprets the narrator as Maugham himself and the painter as Paul Gauguin all results in misreading. This novel represents Maugham's early experiment of undoing the genres of biography and fiction. Genre, as John Frow writes, is a "universal dimension of textuality" and "a form of symbolic action" (2), creating effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, setting up readers' preconceptions of how to approach the text. *The Moon and Sixpence* is a story about storytelling. The main plot is narrated by a biographer who traces the painter's life in London, Paris, and Tahiti, but is unable to understand his inner world except for observing his painting. In Chapter Two, I discussed the frame narrative structure and the unreliable narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence* – the author is alerting readers of the narrator's unreliability "through reliable manipulation" (Wood 5). This novel encapsulates Maugham's ironic claim that writing an objective and impartial biography is impossible.

The opening chapter of the novel, however, borrows the form of a biography. The unreliable narrator rationalises his project by introducing existing biographies of the painter, Charles Strickland, and his wish to correct the biases of two existing biographies, a complimentary one by the artist's son, Rev Robert Strickland, and a negative one by a historian, Dr Weitbrecht-Rotholz. The narrator recollects that, four years after Strickland's death, an article by the journalist Maurice Huret rescued the unknown painter from oblivion, and a great number of writers turned to writing biographies of Charles Strickland. Since Strickland lived in obscurity, most of the biographies were borne of romantic imagination. The painter's son Rev Robert Strickland portrays his father as "an excellent husband and father, a man of kindly temper, industrious habits and moral disposition" (MS 4). In his biography, Rev Strickland quoted his father's letter from Paris describing his mother as "an excellent woman", but Dr Weibrecht-Rotholz published the letter in facsimile, which reads: *God damn my wife. She is an excellent woman. I wish she was in hell* (MS

5, italic original). These statements humorously reveal Maugham's irony of biography as a non-fictional genre which, however, sometimes distorts truth.

The novel's first chapter provides the narrator's four footnotes and bibliographical citations on the life and works of Strickland – they are, of course, fabricated – listed below:

*A Modern Artist: Notes on the work of Charles Strickland*, by Edward Leggatt, ARHA. Martin Secker, 1917. (MS 2n)

*Karl Strickland: Sein Leben Und Seine Kunst*, by Hugo Weitrecht-Rotholz, Ph.D. Schwingel und Hanisch. Leipzig, 1914. (MS 3n)

*Strickland: The Man and His Work*, by his son, Robert Strickland. Wm Heinemann, 1913. (MS 4n)

This [Strickland's painting, *The Woman of Samaria*] was described in Christie's catalogue as follows: A nude woman, a native of the Society Islands, is lying on the ground beside a brook. Behind is a tropical landscape with palm trees, bananas, etc.,. 60 in. by 48 in. (MS 5n)

The fictional author in the first footnote is worth attention. The narrator claims that his friend Mr Edward Leggatt is “an able writer as well as an admirable painter” (MS 2). This reference is carefully designed with bold satirical humour. Laurence Wright finds Edward Leggatt (1853–1922) is a real person who was at one time “distinctive, unmistakable among London's fine-art cognoscenti”, whose personal taste centred on solid, unadventurous English art, often rural in nature, and whose writerly output was largely dominated by staid catalogue notes (“Fictional Texts” 160–61). He could never, like the avant-garde Irish painter Roderic O'Connor, a friend of Gauguin and Maugham, be an ARHA (Associates of the Royal Hibernian Academy). It is unlikely that the historical Edward Leggatt would have appreciated the works of a Post-Impressionist painter, nor publish a monograph through Martin Secker, the groundbreaking publisher of modernist figures such as D. H. Lawrence, Ford Madox Ford, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and Henry James (Wright “Fictional

Texts” 161). This witty allusion not only satirises conventional Edwardian taste but also provides a view of the publishing world that Maugham navigated in London in the early twentieth century. Such a citation is one example of Maugham’s “reliable manipulation” (Wood 5) of the unreliable text. His playfulness teaches intelligent readers to distinguish the fictional world in *The Moon and Sixpence* from the real world.

A number of literary critics, including Laurence Brander and Darren J. Borg, misread this novel by pointing out Maugham’s “technique of telling a story in the first person, not as a character, but as the author” (Borg 20). Maugham’s strategy here is quite the opposite: the first-person narrator masquerades as the author and hoaxes the readers into believing his narrative, which is in fact unreliable. This technique is also widely seen in Maugham’s other fiction: *Cakes and Ale*, *The Razor’s Edge*, and many short stories.

As with his ironizing of biography, in which a biographer fails to understand the subject, Maugham becomes critical of omniscient narration as his literary career develops. He claims that an author can never fully understand a character. His motive for using the first-person singular narrative is explained self-reflexively by the autobiographical narrator in *Cakes and Ale*:

As we grow older we become more conscious of the complexity, incoherence, and unreasonableness of human beings [...] Sometimes the novelist feels himself like God and is prepared to tell you everything about his characters; sometimes, however, he does not; and then he tells you not everything that is to be known about them but the little he knows himself; and since as we grow older we feel ourselves less and less like God I should not be surprised to learn that with advancing years the novelist grows less and less inclined to describe more than his own experience has given him. The first person singular is a very useful device for this limited purpose. (*CA* 145)

Here Maugham points out that the “complexity, incoherence, and unreasonableness of human beings” pose a challenge to the novelist’s expressive capacity. This is similar to Virginia Woolf’s claim that “all novels [...] deal with character” (*MBMB* 9) and her critique of Edwardian writers who “laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things” but somehow ignored human nature (*MBMB* 18). All Maugham’s fiction, except *The Painted Veil*, starts with character. Strickland’s “irrational and shadowy” (*CA* 145) character lies beyond a coherent and chronological narrative. The narrative of *The Moon and Sixpence* is constructed piecemeal by the narrator through second- and third-hand information, a narrative structure similar to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* as I argued in Chapter Two. The portrait of Strickland appears “fragmentary and incomplete,” like a cubist painting emphasising the impenetrability of the essence (Borg 24).

Another thing to which Maugham pays special attention in fiction writing is verisimilitude. He critiques Henry James’s stories as “unbelievable” (Borg 16). Maugham seems to appreciate James’s ingenious method of telling his story through the sensibilities of an observer, yet he continues, “[w]hat this observer did not know could be left conveniently mysterious” (*SU* 213). Here we return to a previous point that Maugham does not believe an author can fully understand the ‘observer’ as a character. Maugham invented his own narrative method by turning James’s observer into an autobiographical one: “It was, however, only a slight variation from the autobiographical form that has many of the same advantages” (*SU* 213). *The Moon and Sixpence* is among Maugham’s earliest experiments with autobiographical first-person narrative, featuring a cubist, incomplete, and collage-like portrait of Strickland and, by contrast, a sense of reality by drawing on real figures and paintings. Maugham’s verisimilitude in this novel is so strong that literary critics have been misled to find realistic allusions in his fiction while neglecting the unreliability of his fictional autobiographical narrator.

Maugham's 'external' approach of describing an impenetrable character from an autobiographical observer's limited perspective goes against Virginia Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, which allows the narrative to take place in a character's mind. Yet both writers were conscious of the complexity of human nature and experimented with different ways of presenting character. Also, unlike Conrad's and Henry James's impressionism, Maugham's impressionism reaches us second- or third- hand, through the eyes of the autobiographical narrator or the stories about Strickland collected in Tahiti. These impressions are elusive and sometime unreliable because of the irony that Maugham builds up a strong sense of verisimilitude while undoing reality through an unreliable narrator.

The second chapter of *The Moon and Sixpence* is an autobiographical apologia: the narrator was just the man for the new generation of writers to attack (Brander 66). He is as marginalised as Strickland or Maugham himself, who was excluded from avant-garde literary circles. The narrator expresses his stance clearly: "I do not like them. I am on the shelf. I will continue to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. But I should be thrice a fool if I did it for aught but my own entertainment." (MS 9). Evidently, Maugham does not write 'moral stories in rhymed couplets', which here seems to jokily mean 'about ethical questions using traditional genre'. He does not write poetry, and as discussed in Chapter Two, he critiques Jane Austen's moral lessons in *Mansfield Park*. But one thing here is autobiographical: the narrator writes simply for his own entertainment. So does Maugham.

The subject matter of this novel can be compared with other artist fiction in Maugham's times, for example, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) and Wyndham Lewis' *Tarr* (1917), demonstrating "artistic powers are both a divine gift and a demonic curse that isolates and tortures the outcast" (Meyers *SMAL* 180). Robert Calder locates *The Moon and Sixpence* among the artist novels at the turn of the century: while the nineteenth century concentrated on the life of the painter with little emphasis on his work, the

twentieth century, even with an increased interest in the artistic experience, has produced few credible portraits of artists (*Freedom* 150). He views Maugham's portrait of Strickland as an isolated and genuine rebel against the society as "one of the best examples of the realistic treatment of the artist" (Calder *Freedom* 134). R. A. Cordell, an authority on and acquaintance with Maugham, labels *The Moon and Sixpence* as "autobiographical" but inferior to his other two autobiographical novels *Of Human Bondage* and *Cakes and Ale*, because of many digressions unrelated to Strickland's life as a painter: the lengthy interlude of Dirk and Blanche Stroeve, the long account of Captain Nichols's career and the essay on beachcombers, and the unlikely story of Dr Abraham (Cordell 104). The subject matter of *The Moon and Sixpence* as an artist novel is important, continuing from the Paris chapters in *Of Human Bondage* and placing Maugham in line with modernist writers such as James Joyce, yet scholars have largely refrained from exploring Maugham's experimental narrative methods in detail.

*The Moon and Sixpence* moves further away from biographical convention because Charles Strickland seldom speaks. The narrative is full of other characters' voices and subjective judgements while the painter's inner world remains unknown: Mrs Strickland believes her husband is a dull stockbroker without any social gifts. The narrator seems to agree: "He was probably a worthy member of society, a good husband and father, an honest broker; but there was no reason to waste one's time over him" (*MS* 20). The lack of access to Strickland's inner thoughts or motives of behaviours leads the author-narrator to speculate, which marks another remove from the nonfictional nature of biography.

Similarly, most characters in this novel do not understand Strickland's painting. The narrator reports that Strickland is "a great artist, a very great artist" (*MS* 68) as a quotation from his painter-friend Dirk Stroeve with a highly sceptical attitude. The narrator thought Strickland's painting was bad at the first sight, and his lack of aesthetic sensibilities marks another layer of unreliable narrative and a reminder that the narrator is not the author,

because Maugham has sharp sensibilities in painting, particularly Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. Strickland's painting becomes a crucial clue for the narrator and other characters to understand the painter's inner life. However, the "spirit" and "mystery" of Strickland's painting "forever escape" (Borg 24–25). The essence of the painter's character eludes the narrator.

The narrator, then, starts to reflect on his previous judgement of Strickland: "it seems strange even to myself when I have described a man who was cruel, selfish, brutal, and sensual, to say that he was a great idealist" (*MS* 153). The narrative becomes a meta-narrative here: the narrator steps out of the story and reflects on the limits of his narrative. The biographer/narrator's self-reflection of his own narrative is similar to what Longxi Zhang puts forward as "the poet's awareness of the limits of language" in T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (*The Tao and the Logos* 73). The author–narrator senses that Strickland's impenetrable character is the key to writing his current 'biography', but he cannot grasp it. What he has already written only scratches the surface of Strickland's character, while its essence exists beyond the text.

In the author's unpublished note on the title (received by the office of George H. Doran on June 30, 1919, but returned on July 22, 1919, after the American Edition was published on July 13, 1919) preserved in the Harry Ransom Centre, Maugham wrote:

In italics

Since some readers of this novel have found its title obscure the author ventures upon the following explanation. In his childhood he was urged to make merry over the man who, looking for the moon, missed the sixpence at his feet, but having reached years of maturity he is not so sure that this was so great an absurdity as he was bidden to believe. Let him who will pick up the sixpence, to pursue the moon seems the more amusing diversion. ("Note on Title")

The 'author' here also refers to the autobiographical author-narrator. The first three quarters of the book is unsatisfactory according to the narrator, so he needs to find out what has been missed in his previous writing. The narrator at his younger stage is the one who makes merry over the man (Strickland) who was looking for the moon but missed the sixpence at his feet. The 'sixpence' only appears at the ending of the novel symbolising parochialism: the narrator recollects his childhood in his hometown, when sixpence could buy half a dozen Royal Native oysters. Fifteen years since the narrator last saw Strickland, who died nine years prior, the narrator visits Tahiti to look for the missing part in his narrative. Despite his effort in interviewing local people and collecting evidence, the narrator still cannot understand Strickland: "I felt that Strickland had kept his secret to the grave" (*MS* 210). The moon image never appears in the novel, but Maugham's 'note on title' seems to present an adequate response to the remark in *The Times Literary Supplement's* unsigned review of *Of Human Bondage*: "like so many young men he [Philip Carey] was so busy yearning for the moon that he never saw the sixpence at his feet" (Curtis and Whitehead 124; Wright "Conclusion" 92). For Maugham, the moon is a metaphor for the lure of art as it affects Carey and Strickland, in contrast to the material world of sixpences.

The Paris chapters in *The Moon and Sixpence* resonate with the Paris chapters in *Of Human Bondage* in describing the realistic hardship of being an artist. The narrator finds Strickland in Paris five years after meeting him in London: "In the first place his red beard, ragged and untrimmed, hid much of his face, and his hair was long; but the most surprising change in him was his extreme thinness. It made his great nose protrude more arrogantly; it emphasized his cheek-bones; it made his eyes seem larger. There were deep hollows at his temples. His body was cadaverous" (*MS* 70–71). This physical description recalls that of the destitute and unkempt art students, especially Fanny Price, in *Of Human Bondage*. In *The Moon and Sixpence*, there is only one subtle clue of the cultural expectation on Strickland enforced by his family: he said, "I'd rather wanted to be a painter when I was a boy, but my

father made me go into business because he said there was no money in art" (*MS* 44). The narrator asks Strickland questions, such as why he left his family and decided to learn painting in Paris, why he thought he had talent, and what if he turned out to be a bad painter, Strickland repeats his answer "I've got to paint" three times (*MS* 44–45). The inarticulate painter reports nothing but his irresistible impulse: "I can't help myself. When a man falls into the water it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown." (*MS* 45). Similarly, the artistic impulse is expressed in *Of Human Bondage*: "The only reason that one paints is that one can't help it" (*HB* 265), and in *The Summing Up*: "The artist produces for the liberation of his soul. It is his nature to create as it is the nature of water to run down hill" (*SU* 182).

In *The Moon and Sixpence*, the most salient character is Strickland, and it is his inarticulacy that develops the novel into a Post-Impressionist project. Coined by Roger Fry in 1910, 'Post-Impressionism' can be loosely defined as a "rejection of the Impressionists' concern for the naturalistic depiction of light and colour in favour of an emphasis on abstract qualities or symbolic content" (Boyle-Turner). Strickland's inarticulacy is a crucial symbol for the limits of artistic language in general and his painting symbolises the artist's effort to overcome such limits. Strickland's speeches are often short, direct, and impersonal: "His vocabulary was small, and he had no gift for framing sentences, so that one had to piece his meaning together out of interjections, the expression of his face, gestures and hackneyed phrases" (*MS* 140–41). Katherine Mansfield does not seem to agree that Strickland is a great artist because of his inarticulacy and otherworldly contempt for life: "If to be a great artist were to push over everything that comes in one's way, topple over the table, lunge out right and left like a drunken man in a cafe and send the pots flying, then Strickland was a great artist. But great artists are not drunken men; they are men who are divinely sober" (Curtis and Whitehead 142). Ironically, Mansfield's most famous story "The Garden Party" also ends with an inarticulate moment highly symbolic of the limits of language: "Isn't life,"

she stammered, ‘isn’t life—’ But what life was she couldn’t explain. No matter. He quite understood. ‘*Isn’t it, darling?*’ said Laurie” (Mansfield). Strickland’s inarticulation makes it impossible for his character to be fully presented, inviting the readers to contemplate the symbolic meaning behind the incomplete cubist portrait of Strickland as an artist.

Since the narrator has no access to Strickland’s thought and feelings, the painter’s process of artistic creation is mostly speculated on by the narrator based on his own experience of writing. One thing shared in the processes of artistic creation, no matter writing or painting, is the difficulty of finding language, voiced by the narrator:

Each one of us is alone in the world. He is shut in a tower of brass, and can communicate with his fellows only by signs, and the signs have no common value, so that their sense is vague and uncertain. We seek pitifully to convey to others the treasures of our heart, but they have not the power to accept them, and so we go lonely, side by side but not together, unable to know our fellows and unknown by them. We are like people living in a country whose language they know so little that, with all manner of beautiful and profound things to say, they are condemned to the banalities of the conversation manual. Their brain is seething with ideas, and they can only tell you that the umbrella of the gardener’s aunt is in the house. (*MS* 146–47)

The surface meaning of this passage suggests the imprecision of verbal language, as structural linguistics points out: “*The linguistic sign is arbitrary*” (Saussure 78, italic original). This passage can also be read as a metaphor for the imprecision of artistic, poetic, and narrative language. Both the narrator and the painter exert their efforts to express themselves but become aware that language is inadequate to express ideas and emotions. Seeing Strickland’s paintings, the narrator senses something beyond language:

I felt that these pictures had something to say to me that was very important for me to know. But I could not tell what it was. They seemed to me ugly,

but they suggested without disclosing a secret of momentous significance. They were strangely tantalizing. They gave me an emotion that I could not analyse. They said something that words were powerless to utter. I fancy that Strickland saw vaguely some spiritual meaning in material things that was so strange that he could only suggest it with halting symbols. It was as though he found in the chaos of the universe a new pattern, and were attempting clumsily, with anguish of soul, to set it down. I saw a tormented spirit striving for the release of expression. (*MS* 146)

The narrator here is unreliable: he thought Strickland's paintings were ugly. In fact, Maugham collected Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings all his life. Before his death, the reproductions of thirty-seven of his favourite paintings were published as a book *Purely for My Pleasure* (1962). Here we need a close look at Strickland's paintings.

The narrator thought that "Strickland drew very badly": "I remembered a still-life of oranges on a plate, and I was bothered because the plate was not round the oranges were lop-sided"; "the portraits were a little larger than life-size, and this gave them an ungainly look"; the landscape of forest at Fontainebleau and streets in Paris has "extraordinarily crude" colour (*MS* 145). The narrator's 'impressions' of Strickland's unnatural representation of fruit plates, portraits, and landscapes obviously allude to the Post-Impressionist school of painting. In a series of articles on the realistic allusions in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Laurence Wright has traced most of Maugham's 'citations' of Gauguin's paintings and claims that Maugham borrowed "unashamedly" from Gauguin's actual output to supply the substance of his fictional hero's artistic achievement ("Fictional Texts" 159). For example, Wright finds the still-life of oranges alludes to Gauguin's *Nature morte aux fruits et piments* (*Still Life with Tahitian Oranges*, 1892, Figure 13), the portraits allude to Gauguin's several self-portraits and the landscape were points to Gauguin's early outputs under the influence of the Barbizon School (Wright "References"). These correspondences

help the reader imagine Strickland's paintings, but they also gesture towards common themes in Post-Impressionist painting more generally. The irregular shapes of plates and oranges, distorted portraits, and crude colours are common in Post-Impressionist paintings in general. Examples of the lop-sided oranges and not-round containers include Cezanne's *Pommes et Oranges* (*Apples and Oranges*, 1899, Figure 14) and Vincent van Gogh's *Still Life of Oranges and Lemons with Blue Gloves* (1889, Figure 15). Maugham's personal collection also includes Post-Impressionist paintings: *Still Life* (Figure 16) by Roderick O'Connor, a close friend of Gauguin and a major figure in the Pont-Aven movement, and Henri Matisse's two portraits: *The Yellow Chair* (Figure 17) and *Lady with a Parasol* (Figure 18). Specifically, Strickland's paintings may well belong to the school of Fauvism, which features "[s]corching colours juxtaposed in full strength, used to create space and light and to express personal feelings" (Pérez-Tibi). Through non-naturalist colours and formal distortion, Strickland achieves his artistic articulation of feelings.

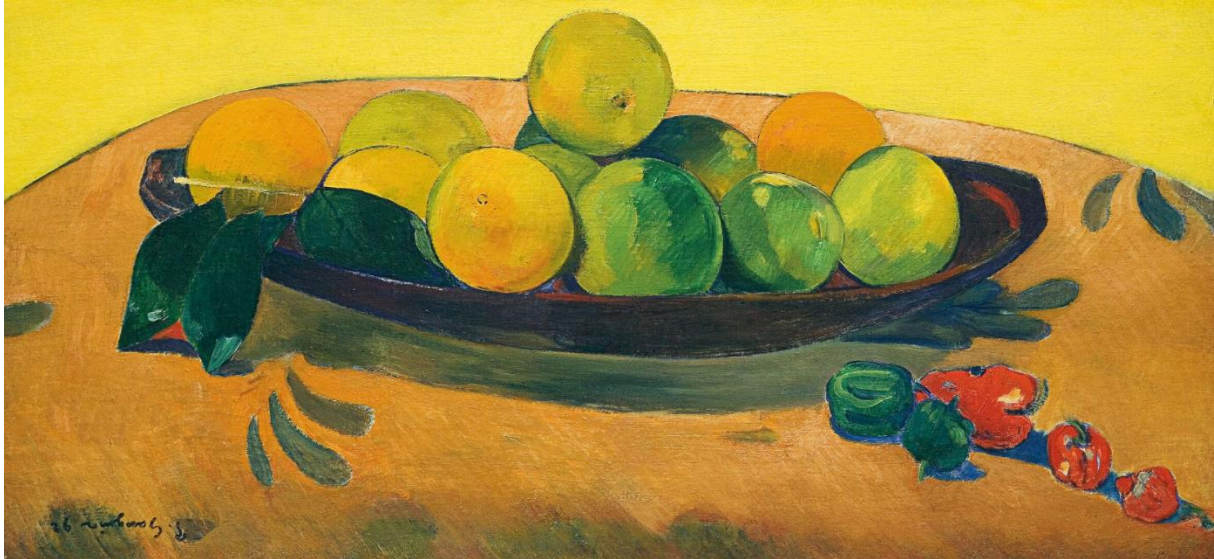


Figure 13. Paul Gauguin, *Still Life with Tahitian Oranges*<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Picture digitalised by Wildenstein Plattner Institute (WPI) Digital Archive. Accessed 31 March 2025: <https://digitalprojects.wpi.art/gauguin/artworks/detail?page=4&a=71672&artwork=71672&media=2605517>.



Figure 14. Paul Cezanne, *Apples and Oranges*<sup>59</sup>



Figure 15. Vincent van Gogh, *Still Life of Oranges and Lemons with Blue Gloves*<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Picture digitalised by Musee d'Orsay. Accessed 31 March 2025: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/pommes-et-oranges-1470>.

<sup>60</sup> Picture digitalised by National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Accessed 31 March 2025: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.164923.html>.



Figure 16. Roderick O'Connor, *Still Life*<sup>61</sup>



Figure 17. Henri Matisse, *The Yellow Chair*<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Picture scanned from W. Somerset Maugham, *Purely for My Pleasure*. Doubleday, 1962. Plate III.

<sup>62</sup> Picture scanned from W. Somerset Maugham, *Purely for My Pleasure*. Doubleday, 1962. Plate I.



Figure 18. Henri Matisse, *Lady with a Parasol*<sup>63</sup>

Strickland's eventual artistic expression is achieved through a symbolic fresco, reflecting on the profound meaning of human life, which, as Wright finds, evokes Gauguin's masterpiece, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (*Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* 1897–1898, Figure 19) ("References"). Strickland's fresco is destroyed by Ata, Strickland's Tahitian wife, in accordance with the painter's will. Dr Coutras, the only witness of Strickland's fresco apart from Ata, describes his 'impressions' of the fresco. The narrator indirectly quotes his descriptions:

From floor to ceiling the walls were covered with a strange and elaborate composition. It was indescribably wonderful and mysterious. It took his breath away. It filled him with an emotion which he could not understand or

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<sup>63</sup> Picture scanned from W. Somerset Maugham, *Purely for My Pleasure*. Doubleday, 1962. Plate XXII.

analyse. He felt the awe and the delight which a man might feel who watched the beginning of the world. It was tremendous, sensual, passionate; and yet there was something horrible there too, something which made him afraid. It was the work of a man who had delved into the hidden depths of nature and had discovered secrets which were beautiful and fearful too. (*MS* 204–05)

This passage evokes Edmund Burke's idea of the Sublime, which is predicated upon 'terror', "a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (42). Burke distinguishes his use of the word Delight to express the "sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger" from the word Pleasure which means general positive pleasure (34). Burke refers to whatever that evokes this kind of delight, which "turns on pain" (47) and is much more powerful than pleasure, as the Sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.

(Burke 36)

The Burkean sublime exists as an immediate emotional response to dangerous objects before reason can engage itself (Slocombe 30). It is a primal response of human beings in the face of pain and danger. It defies reason. What Dr Coutras felt by 'an emotion which he could not understand or analyse', 'the awe and the delight', 'something horrible', and 'something which made him afraid' is exactly the Burkean sublime. The sublime is a subjective bodily experience which cannot be defined by objective descriptions. Maugham's strategy of describing the fresco with third-hand 'impressions' full of powerful feelings but

lacking accurate descriptions is a deliberate choice because the sublime exists beyond language.



Figure 19. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*<sup>64</sup>

Completing his fresco, Strickland is liberated from his lifelong struggle of expression. His spirit is freed from his bodily existence. Under the fresco, Dr Coutras saw the painter's dead body: "the dreadful, mutilated, ghastly object which had been Strickland" (*MS 205*). Here the idea of liberation reflects Longinus's concept of sublime freedom, where the sublime frees man from the world through his own nature: "It is our nature to be exalted and elevated by true sublimity" (cited in Slocombe 40–41). Strickland's spirit is elevated from the material world to a realm of sublimity: "His life was complete" (*MS 208*). Strickland's real-life model, Paul Gauguin, when planning his suicide in 1897, decided to paint one great, last testamentary picture, in which he would put all his energy, "a passion so painful, in terrible circumstances, and a vision so clear, needing no correction, that the hastiness disappears and life surges up" to liberate himself from the world of sickness and poverty (Goldwater 142). Compared with Gauguin's canvas, Strickland uses a more old-fashioned technique, fresco, which requires more time for preparation and a shorter time for painting, although he was blind at that time. Strickland's inarticulate life becomes sublime

<sup>64</sup> Picture digitalised by MFA Boston. Accessed 31 March 2025: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/32558>.

at the moment of completing this fresco. Gauguin quotes Mallarmé to explain the symbolistic meaning of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*: “the essence of a work, unsubstantial and of a higher order, lies precisely in ‘what is not expressed; it is the implicit result of the lines without color or words; it has no material being’...” (Goldwater 144). The narrator and readers of *The Moon and Sixpence* will never ‘view’ Strickland’s fresco, but the fictional piece of art certainly points to a metaphysical meaning which is sublime.

Strickland’s eventual success in artistic expression bears comparison with the ending of *To the Lighthouse*: “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision” (Woolf *TL* 209). Readers have no complete idea of Lily Briscoe’s painting except for the impression that among greens and blues, she drew a line in the centre. For modernist writers and artists, what was painted and what was written became in some ways less important, and how it was written or painted became the key question (Childs *Modernism* 119). We do not know how Strickland, in the last stage of his life, finished painting his fresco. All we have access are Dr Coutras’s fearful sensations and obscure impressions, as though language cannot do justice to the image. By finishing her painting, Lily Briscoe, who battles with social expectations (“woman cannot paint”), expresses an alternative reality to the silencing role of woman (Crater 131–35). Similarly, by finishing the fresco, Strickland achieves his artistic transcendence and merges into the sublime.

### ***Anshi*, or Suggestion**

After his four months’ stay in China from 1919 to 1920, Maugham brought a suitcase of Chinese artifacts back to London: “porcelain, Ming figures, Chinese silks” (Hastings 277), and “a Chinese figure of the goddess Kuan-Yin,” which, in the following decades, dominated the hall of Maugham’s residence Villa Mauresque in the south of France (Hastings 367). Maugham lived in Villa Mauresque from 1927 until his death in 1965,

where he decorated the black slate floor of the hall with “Chinese carpets” and filled the house with “the Oriental art he’d collected on his travels” (Meyers *SMAL* 217–18). A hundred years later, I cannot find pictures of these Chinese artifacts and artworks in Maugham’s villa, but according to both his biographers, Maugham valued his Chinese collection all his life.

This section examines Maugham’s encounter with Chinese art during his travel, his pre-existing knowledge of Chinese history, poetry, and philosophy, and the impact of Chinese aesthetics on his understanding of art and literature in general. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Maugham visited China at a critical moment in the nation’s modernisation. Maugham is, as Jeffrey Meyers claims, “the first modern English author” to write about China (*SMAL* 195). His travel took place much earlier than the figures mentioned in Chapter One, before I. A. Richards, William Empson, Auden and Isherwood, who visited China in the 1930s. Maugham is fascinated with the Daoist aesthetic, with its “preference for suggestion over assertion” (Zhaoming Qian 75) playing a definitive role in the formation of modernist poetry by Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore. The practice of Chinese art features a conspicuous “desire to attain the Dao”; consequently, the finest of Chinese artworks – often landscapes or pictures of flowers and birds – embody “a power of getting the unsayable message of the Dao said” (Zhaoming Qian 65). Then, Maugham’s aesthetic appraisal of Chinese art becomes a crucial modernist moment: he visited China and watched the process of artists painting and doing calligraphy while Pound and Moore observed the resultant artworks in Western museums.

This section argues that the Chinese aesthetic principles of ‘suggestion’ and ‘reserve’ formulate new methods for Maugham to ‘present the unrepresentable’. Among all the Eastern countries that Maugham visited, China plays the most important role because its Daoist aesthetic allows Maugham to rethink artistic principles and ways to overcome the limits of language, particularly reflected in his experimental novel *The Painted Veil*, which I will

discuss in the next section. Before his journey to China, Maugham was familiar with Daoist philosophical texts such as *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and he was re-reading these books on his travels. This artistic and philosophical perspective of Maugham's China has not received sufficient attention in existing Maugham studies and modernism studies in general.

Most scholars, including Maugham's friend Harold Acton, believe that Maugham never managed to fully understand Chinese culture (Calder *Freedom* 18). Robert Calder quotes the following deleted passage in Maugham's manuscript of *The Summing Up* to argue that he was "untouched" by his experience in China:

Because I once wrote two or three things about China, people are constantly sending me, or advising me to read, books on that wonderful country. How they bore me! I have written all I want to about China & while I was doing it read as many books about it as I could get hold of, histories, travels, translations from its literature, novels; but now I am as little interested in it as I am in the ritualistic quarrels of the Byzantine Empire. It is an experience I have passed through. It has nothing to do with me any more. Other subjects claim my attention. (cited in Calder *Freedom* 18)

This confession doesn't support the conclusion that Maugham was not influenced by his experiences in China. By contrast, it proves Maugham's serious engagement with and committed curiosity of China including its history and literature when writing about this country. This quotation shows that Maugham was conscientious and affectionate, refuting contemporary orientalist interpretations accusing him of lacking Eastern knowledge. An arduous visit to China enabled Maugham to closely appreciate Chinese art and understand the underlying Daoist aesthetic. After his travel and publication of several books about China, Maugham's interest turned to Indian philosophy including Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism, which I will demonstrate in Chapter Four.

Maugham's attitudes towards China evolve during his writing career, from a distant observer at a young age to an admirer of Chinese art during his travel. Admittedly, a mystical image of China exists in Maugham's early works. In time, a wide-ranging reading of Chinese materials gradually demystifies Maugham's writing and brings him closer to Eastern art and philosophy. In the 1897-1898 manuscript "The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey", Stephen expresses his willingness to go to China as a missionary "to convert the heathen" ("ATSC" 172), a cultural bias perhaps understandable for his time and the level of his experience but one which was to be replaced by a more progressive and informed view. In the 1908 novel *The Magician*, the East (Himalayas) becomes a magical metaphor, a spell that can hypnotise a sane person with a special fragrance. For instance, when Oliver Haddo enchants Margaret, "The splendour of the East blinded her eyes. [...] The fragrance of the East filled her nostrils" (*TM* 102). In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip's desire for the East is free of cultural bias: "I want to go to the East – the Malay Archipelago, Siam, China, and all that sort of thing – and then I shall take odd jobs" (*HB* 342). In the Heidelberg chapters of this novel, Maugham describes a "Chinaman", Mr Sung, "with a yellow face and an expansive smile", who studies Western conditions at Heidelberg University and speaks German fluently (*HB* 96). This character may be a reference to the historical background of Chinese intellectuals' Western education and self-othering tendencies in the early twentieth century, outlined in Chapter One. The episode of Mr Sung's love affair with a German girl Cäcilie reflects the discrimination Chinese people faced in Europe at that time. The hostess of their boarding house, Frau Professor, opposes their relationship simply because Mr Sung is Chinese: "She said that it wouldn't be so dreadful, but a Chinaman, with his yellow skin and flat nose, and his little pig's eyes!" (*HB* 130), a stereotyped image of the Chinaman analysed in the 'East as Other' section in Chapter One. Amidst the nervous anti-China atmosphere in the boarding house, Mr Sung "remained unaffected; he was no less smiling, affable, and polite than he had been before: one

could not tell whether his manner was a triumph of civilization or an expression of contempt on the part of the Oriental for the vanquished West" (*HB* 133). This idea of Chinese contempt for the West will soon develop into Maugham's more forceful critique of Western imperialism in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* and *East of Suez* after his conversations with a Chinese scholar as argued in Chapter Two. Maugham concludes the episode with the elopement of Mr Sung and Cäcilie overnight. That their story literally disappears from the main plot suggests that there is no room for this narrative in Western culture at the time.

Before the publication of his three works about China – a play, *East of Suez*; a novel, *The Painted Veil*; and a collection of sketches, *On a Chinese Screen* – Maugham sent the typescript of the latter to the well-known sinologist H. I. Harding for expert appraisal (Hastings 274). Harding read the typescript with care and made a number of corrections. Maugham accepted thirty-six out of forty-one suggestions from Harding but did not agree with the other five in which he believes Harding misunderstood his meaning. For instance, in response to Harding's suggestion "p. 126 may I object to the epithet singular? The Chinese may strike us as singular, weird, funny, curious, strange, mysterious, etc, but at the same time we strike the inexperienced Chinese in just the same way...", Maugham replied "I did not call the Chinese singular because they are Chinese but because of artistic capacities which do surely distinguish them from other peoples..." (cited in Hastings 274). This example proves Maugham's particular interest in the artistic capacities of Chinese people and a general artistic appreciation of China, evident in *On a Chinese Screen*.

In the following, I focus on Maugham's encounter with the Chinese artistic principle of 'suggestiveness' in poetry, painting, architecture, reflected in *On a Chinese Screen*. I argue that the Daoist aesthetic of 'suggestiveness' has the similar effect as literary impressionism in dealing with the limits of artistic language and undoing the Western binaries. Chinese art becomes Maugham's method to challenge Eurocentric thinking and paves way for his

literary experiment of presenting the heroine's spiritual fulfilment through appreciating Chinese landscape and understanding the empty Dao in *The Painted Veil*.

One key concept of Chinese aesthetics is “suggestiveness”, (*anshi* 暗示, or ‘suggestion’), literally meaning to show something by inexplicit hint. It generally refers to the desirable artistic quality highly valued in different forms of art, especially in poetry (Ming Dong Gu 491). Traditional Chinese literary theory, featuring such concepts as epiphany, obscurity, and impressionism, and the expression of meaning beyond language, was originally developed by poets and literary critics. The discussion of expressive limits can be dated back to the third century, when Lu Ji expounded the difficulty of writing in *The Art of Writing (Wenfu)*: “I always worry that my ideas fail to express their subject and that my words are even further removed from insufficient ideas” (Barnstone et al. 7). In the sixth century, Zhong Rong demonstrated “the text may come to an end, but the implications are more than plenty” in the preface to *Classification of Poetry (Shipin)*, which later evolved into Yan Yu's famous dictum “the number of words is limited, but the ideas it suggests are limitless” (Ming Dong Gu 491). The Tang poet Sikong Tu discussed in the eleventh chapter in *The Twenty-four Styles of Poetry (Ershisi Shipin)* the notion of ‘reserve’ (*hanxu* 含蓄), literally meaning ‘holding back’ (*han*) and ‘storing up’ (*xu*). This book presents literary criticism in a poetic form, in which the opening quatrain reads:

Without a single word  
the essence is conveyed.  
Without speaking of misery  
a passionate sadness comes through. (Barnstone et al. 31)

*Hanxu* is one of Sikong Tu's strongest chapters in *The Twenty-four Styles of Poetry* and this theory is applied to a great extent in Sikong's own poetry (Lijun Du 117). “Without a single word” means without directly being written out, and “the essence” in original Chinese corresponds to two characters “wind and flow” (*fengliu*), suggesting free and transcendental

meaning beyond literal capture. Sikong Tu's concept of *hanxu* is fully connoted in the first two lines, and the third and fourth lines provide a supporting scenario.

Ancient literary theorists also attached high importance to emotion in Chinese poetry. In *Wenfu*, Lu Ji expressed his inspiration of writing: "I sigh as the four seasons spin by / and the swarm of living things kindles many thoughts" (Barnstone et al. 8). In *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons (Wenxin Diaolong)*, Liu Xie emphasised the importance of emotions to literary creation in Chapter Twenty-six, 'Spirit Thought or Imagination' (*Shensi*): "Under the operation of the spirit the phenomenal world becomes articulate, / in response to varying emotional situations" (Liu et al. 208). However, the emotions are often expressed indirectly and aroused only by referring to other images, reflecting the principle of *hanxu*. This tradition of conveying strong emotions in a restrained way can be represented by *Nineteen Old Poems*, an anthology of nineteen ancient Chinese five-character-line poems collected in the Han Dynasty. Zhong Rong commented in *Classification of Poetry* that *Nineteen Old Poems* 'uses moderate and beautiful language to create a tragic yet profound meaning'<sup>65</sup>. This principle is well understood in modernist poetics. Commenting on Li Bai's 'The Jewel Stairs' Grievance', Ezra Pound writes: "the poem is especially prized because the woman utters no direct reproach" (*Cathay* 40). Pound translated the whole poem as:

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,  
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,  
And I let down the crystal curtain  
And watch the moon through the clear autumn. (*Cathay* 40)

The jewel stairs refer to a palace, and the gauze stockings suggest the speaker is a court lady. She stands on the stairs for a long time because the dew has not only whitened the

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<sup>65</sup> '文溫以麗，意悲而遠' my translation, cited from 'Chinese Philosophical Text Digitalisation Project': <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=771836>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

stairs but soaked her stockings. In the second couplet, she comes back to the room but can do nothing but watch the moon through the crystal curtain. This poem speaks no word of the court lady's loneliness; Pound's observation corresponds to Sikong Tu's poetic theory: 'Without speaking of misery, a passionate sadness comes through.'

Maugham is fully aware of the importance of understanding images and emotions which are not commonly outspoken in traditional Chinese poetry. In 'The Sinologue', Maugham describes a pedantic sinologue who buries himself in Chinese books and has been working for ten years on a dictionary "which will supersede that of a noted scholar whom for a quarter of a century he has personally disliked" (*OCS* 142). Herbert A. Giles identifies the sinologue as one of his pupils Sir Edmund Backhouse and the 'noted scholar' is himself: "Further, in a book entitled *On a Chinese Screen*, by Somerset Maugham, 1922, there is a sketch labelled 'The Sinologue,' which was readily identified with Sir Edmund Backhouse and which incidentally involves me" (Aylme 39). The Backhouse dictionary was completed in 1920 but wasn't put on the market, and the manuscript of this work was burned when the Japanese occupied Peking in 1937 (Aylme 39 n208). Maugham believes the sinologue makes no significant contribution to Chinese literature because he only deals with the poetic form and surface meaning of words yet fails to grasp the essence of Chinese poetry, which is often implied: "Art and beauty seem not to touch him" (*OCS* 143). At the end of the vignette, Maugham refers to Li Bai (Li Po)'s poetry:

Here is a man who has touched reality only through the printed page. The tragic splendour of the lotus moves him only when its loveliness is enshrined in the verse of Li Po and the laughter of demure Chinese girls stirs his blood but in the perfection of an exquisitely chiselled quatrain. (*OCS* 143)

The poem being alluded to is Li Bai's 'Melody of Lotus Seed Picking' ('Cai Lian Qu' 采蓮曲), describing a merry scene where the demure lotus-picking girls attract male youths'

unspoken affection, which arouses the poet's sadness at the transient beautiful moments and at his advanced years. Here is a translation of the poem:

Young girls picking lotus seeds are gathered next to Ruoye Stream,  
 What intertwined with the lotus are their giggles and whispers.  
 Their elaborate makeups illuminate even the bottom of the water,  
 long sleeves waving in the air, brushed by the fragrant breeze.  
 Look! Who are those handsome and elegant lads on the banks,  
 lingering among those drooping willows, in twos and threes.  
 I am riding a steed, whizzing through the falling flowers,  
 Passing these young souls, leaving lonely and sorrowfully... (Bai Li)

Maugham's wording 'tragic splendour of the lotus' reflects his understanding of the poem's implied meaning and sympathy with the poet's loneliness and sorrow behind the controlled poetic devices and the merry images: 'laughter of demure Chinese girls'. These few lines clearly show that Maugham grasps *hanxu* as a major aesthetic principle in Chinese poetry.

Chinese painters also follow the principle of suggestiveness. The literati painters in the Song Dynasty do not merely display things or bring forth their presence; rather, they paint them between "there is" and "there is not" (Jullien 5), making them present and absent at the same time. In the opening essay 'Presence-Absence' in *The Great Image Has No Form*, François Jullien discussed the non-ontological essence of Chinese aesthetics by examining the techniques of Chinese painting. The technique of "concealing" creates an atmosphere of "infinity" and "indetermination" (Jullien 12). A dragon is inexhaustibly enthralling when its body is "hidden in the clouds", only showing "a patch of scales" or "half its tail", rather than seen from head to foot (Jullien 13-14). Another technique of using white/blank space (literally in Chinese: 'leaving white/blank') also creates an 'in-between' status and coherence between the two. In landscape (*shanshui*) paintings, "blank spaces" must be left at the joints and folds – "where trees mingle", "where houses pile up", "where the path meanders" (Jullien

14). As a result, an atmosphere of being indefinite is charged between the vagueness effect of dimness and sharpening effect of light, “between mist and gleam”, “brightness and dimness” (Jullien 14). Jullien attributes these features of Chinese painting to Daoist philosophy: the “obvious” is the *yang*, the “hidden” is the *yin*; Dao is born from their alternation (“one time *yin*, one time *yang*”) (Jullien 13). This view is similar to David Hinton’s evaluation of Chinese painting as an expression of Daoism. In an article introducing an exhibition “Streams and Mountains Without End: Landscape Traditions of China” in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2018), he argues “in both its creation and its viewing, ancient Chinese landscape painting reflects an encounter with cosmological origins” (Hinton “Painting” 102). In the introductory section of this chapter, I mentioned that in Daoism, Presence (有, or being) and Absence (無, or non-being) generate each other. Presence is the empirical universe where myriad things undergo constant transformation; Absence is the generative void from which Presence perpetually emerges. Dao is the process where all things arise and pass away as Absence burgeons forth into the constant transformation of Presence. In Chinese landscape painting, the white/blank space is Absence from which the landscape elements (Presence) emerge. The Absence takes many forms: sky, river, mist, cloud, or simply a blank background. These artistic techniques reflect the principle of ‘emptiness’ in Chinese landscape painting and Daoist philosophy. ‘Concealing’ and ‘leaving white/blank’ create generative voids where the landscape appears and vanishes. ‘Emptiness’ in painting is suggestive of endless landscape. In addition, as Hinton points out, the lack of perspective makes the viewer feel somehow inside the work’s cosmology and able to wander there, and the viewer’s slowly rolling the scroll from one side to the other creates the effect of walking through the landscape (“Painting” 106).

Chinese painting works very differently from its Western equivalent – especially in the former’s abundance of empty space and lack of realistic representation (Hinton “Painting” 104). In the Southern Dynasties, Xie He put forward the “Six Canons”, or six

‘tests’ of a painting. The first and all-important one is Rhythmic Vitality (*qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動), or as Laurence Binyon interprets as “Spiritual Rhythm expressed in the movement of life” (*The Flight of the Dragon* 12). Binyon’s translation of *qiyun* as “rhythm” is based on Herbert A. Giles and Kakuzō Okakura’s translations (Peng 19). However, “rhythm” is a concept of modern Western painting and does not strictly equal *qiyun* in traditional Chinese aesthetics. In 2017, Peng Feng, a Professor of Art in Peking University observes that *qiyun* is closer to *xieyi* (寫意, literally ‘draw idea’) “presentational”, usually contrasted with *xieshi* (寫實, literally ‘draw reality’), “representational”, and that the traditional Chinese school of *xieyi* shares similarities with Roger Fry’s ‘rhythm’ in his modernist aesthetics (23).

*Qiyun/xieyi* presents something between emptiness and fullness, while *xieshi* (*shi* 實 also literally means ‘fullness’) only represents reality.

Modernist aesthetics in the West was fundamentally shaped by Chinese painting in its difference from Western painting. Roger Fry, in his essay introducing the Kelekian Collection, argues that traditional Western art (Graeco–Roman art and the High Renaissance) is controlled by the idea of Beauty while both modern Western art and traditional Chinese art embrace “the expression of a particular kind of detached emotion”: Kelekian’s “long familiarity with early Oriental art has trained his taste in the search for what is really significant in the work or art, has given him a courage which has not betrayed him in his choice of modern work” (304). Among Kelekian’s collections, Gustave Courbet’s *Snow Scene by a Lakeside* (Figure 20) recalls the conscious and deliberately poetic handling of great Chinese landscapists of the school of Ma Yuan (Fry 304, 09). I attach a Ma Yuan painting (Figure 21) in which, like the Courbet painting, the landscape is obscured from clear view, limiting the role of perspective. Both pictures create a misty scene which is a ‘presentation’ of the painter’s subjective impressions rather than a ‘representation’ of reality.

Through the images of snow and boat, mountain and waterfall, both paintings achieve symbolism in its vagueness.



Figure 20. Gustave Courbet, *Snow Scene by Lakeside*<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Picture from Roger Fry, "Modern Paintings in a Collection of Ancient Art." *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, vol. 37, no. 213, 1920, Plate I.



Figure 21. Ma Yuan, *Scholar Viewing a Waterfall*<sup>67</sup>

Chinese landscape painting and poetry are interconnected by virtue of their aesthetic principles and sometimes accompany or complement each other. The Tang poet, painter, and Daoist thinker Wang Wei was known for a series of twenty poems titled ‘Wheel-Rim River Sequence’, in which each poem is about a specific place, and Wang Wei painted a companion scroll depicting the same twenty sites (Hinton “Painting” 102). The Song poet Su Shi commented that Wang Wei’s ‘poetry is one with his painting’.<sup>68</sup> In Song Di’s album *Eight Views of Xiao Xiang*, each painting is inscribed with one poem, and all the titles of this album formulate literary parallelism, the main characteristics of regulated verse (Murck 71).

<sup>67</sup> Picture (early thirteenth century) digitalised by the Metropolitan Museum of Art: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/40086>. Accessed 5 November 2023.

<sup>68</sup> ‘詩中有畫，畫中有詩’ my translation, cited from Chinese Idiom Dictionary: <https://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/dictView.jsp?ID=127248&la=0&powerMode=0>. Accessed 4 April 2025.

Ezra Pound's 'Canto 49' seems to emerge as a possible 'Daoist' translation of the Chinese poems inscribed in the *Eight Views of Xiao Xiang* (Yip *Xiao Xiang* 180–86).

*On a Chinese Screen* includes many examples of Maugham's encounter with Chinese painting. Maugham was familiar with such traditional genres as 'landscape' (*shanshui*, literally 'mountain and river') painting and flower-and-bird painting. In 'The Cabinet Minister', Maugham describes a Chinese official as "corrupt, inefficient, and unscrupulous" (*OCS* 10) but who has highbrow interest in Chinese art. The cabinet minister showed Maugham his collections: "priceless porcelains, bronzes, and Tang figures", "the most perfect calligraphies of China", and a number of scrolls (*OCS* 9). Maugham unrolled a scroll of "mountains seen through fleecy clouds" painted in some "early dynasty" (*OCS* 9), which is doubtlessly a *shanshui* painting. The act of unrolling the scroll allows Maugham to enter the endless landscape himself, rather than view it hanging in a gallery. Later in this vignette, Maugham turned the leaves of a precious book of flower-and-bird painting:

It was a series of little pictures of birds and flowers, roughly done with a few strokes, but with such a power of suggestion, with so great a feeling of nature and such a playful tenderness, that it took your breath away. There were sprigs of plum-blossom that held in their dainty freshness all the magic of the spring; there were sparrows in whose ruffled plumage were the beat and the tremor of life. (*OCS* 10)

Maugham's descriptions 'roughly done with a few strokes, but with a power of suggestion' precisely point to the suggestive principle of Chinese painting. The pictures were finished in shorthand but vividly present the spring's vitality: the sprigs of plum-blossom's 'dainty freshness' and the sparrow's 'tremor of life'. In another vignette 'The Picture', Maugham even witnessed a Chinese painter drawing plums and a bird on the wall and writing calligraphy (probably a poem) to accompany the picture:

And here to pass on an idle moment he had taken his stone tablet and, mixing a little water with the stick of ink which he rubbed on it, seized the fine brush with which he executed the beautiful characters of the Chinese writing [...], and with a bold hand he drew on the wall a branch of plum-blossom and a bird perched on it. It was done very lightly, but with an admirable ease; I know not what happy chance guided the artist's touch, for the bird was all a-quiver with life and the plum-blossoms were tremulous on their stalks. The soft airs of spring blew through the sketch into that sordid chamber, and for the beating of a pulse you were in touch with the Eternal. (*OCS* 30–31)

Spring is evoked in a few strokes. This painting brings vitality to the dilapidated inn where Maugham watched this Chinese artist finish his flower-and-bird picture: a bird 'all a-quiver with life' perching on the 'tremulous' plum-blossom stalks. This painting, full of *qi*yun, rhythmic vitality, transported Maugham to a sublime world 'in touch with the Eternal'. Such an embodied experience of watching a pictured being painted in a sordid place enables Maugham to enter the world of flowers and birds, just like the act of unrolling a landscape scroll allows Maugham to enter the landscape. This close observation of artistic creation brings a more intimate proximity between Maugham and the Chinese artwork than the experience of Binyon and Pound viewing Chinese scrolls in the British Museum.

Maugham's observations and understandings of the two major schools of traditional Chinese painting clearly show his affinity with the Chinese aesthetics of suggestiveness.

There is no authoritative record of the pictures Maugham viewed in China. Below (Figure 22) is a representative work of flower-and-bird painting by one master of this genre, the Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, Zhao Ji (1082–1135). It presents a bird and plum blossoms on an empty background just like the wall. Without any perspective or depth in the picture, emptiness allows for the liveliness of the bird and the blossoms.



Figure 22. Zhao Ji, *Eyes Embroidered with Plums*<sup>69</sup>

Chinese garden design also features suggestiveness. In Chapter One, I introduced how the features of disorder and harmony in Chinese gardening inspired the Romantic aesthetics of ‘sharawadgi’ in English architecture and literature. Chinese gardening is suggestive in ‘evoking infinite landscape in the limited space’ (*xiaozhong jianda*): a mound of a few metres high resembles a full-scale mountain and a small pond suggests an expansive lake (Yang et al. viii). Another technique of Chinese gardening is ‘borrowing the landscape’ (*jiejing*), integrating man-made and natural environments, reflecting the Daoist philosophy that man is one with nature. For instance, windows and doors connect the man-made space to the natural space, allowing the viewer to walk into the garden designer’s idea. Maugham seems to know these principles. In ‘The Question’, he writes, “the Chinese architect sought

<sup>69</sup> Picture (twelfth century) digitalised by China Online Museum, original in the Beijing Palace Museum: <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-birds-zhao-ji-2.php>. Accessed 4 April 2025.

to make his creation an ornament to nature and he used the accidents of the landscape to complete his decorative scheme” (OCS 141). Maugham was visiting a temple on the top of a mountain. Watching the trees cunningly contrast with the marble of the gateway of the temple, Maugham was reminded of the Chinese aesthetics of suggesting the connection between man and nature rather than merely building the temple.

The images of mist and rain often appear in Maugham’s travel notes in China, forming a misty landscape like Chinese painting. One example in ‘Dawn’ directly connects the mist rising from the padi fields and the Chinese paintings Maugham viewed:

And now with the increasing day a mist arises from the padi fields and climbs half-way up the gentle hills. You may see a hundred pictures of the sight before you, for it is one that the old masters of China loved exceedingly. The little hills, wooded to their summit, with a line of fir trees along the crest, a firm silhouette against the sky – the little hills rise behind one another, and the varying level of the mist, forming a pattern, gives the composition of a completeness which yet allows the imagination ample scope. (OCS 40)

This is Maugham’s literary impression of describing Chinese landscape. The ‘varying level of the mist’ at dawn obscures the contours where hills meet. Little hills rise one behind another. Fir trees point to the sky. Maugham recognises this misty scene as the kind of landscape that ‘the old masters of China loved exceedingly’ in their paintings. He perceives ‘the composition of a completeness’ in the scenery which seems blurry and incomplete. Chinese philosophy values subtlety and evocation. In *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan wrote: “The sayings and writings of the Chinese philosophers are so inarticulate that their suggestiveness is almost boundless” (12). He continues:

Suggestiveness, not articulateness, is the ideal of all Chinese art, whether it be poetry, painting, or anything else. [...] The ideal of Chinese art is not without its philosophical background. In the twenty-sixth chapter of the

*Chuang-tzu* it is said: “A basket-trap is for catching fish, but when one has got the fish, one need think no more about the basket. A foot-trap is for catching hares; but when one has got the hare, one need think no more about the trap. Words are for holding ideas, but when one has got the idea, one need no longer think about the words. If only I could find someone who had stopped thinking about words and could have him with me to talk to!” (Feng 12–13)

Zhuangzi’s famous metaphor of ‘getting the fish and forgetting the basket’ suggests that language is prison of ideas, and that great ideas are always beyond language. In Daoism, the true meaning (Dao/Tao, the Way) cannot be directly told but only suggested. Laozi begins *Dao De Jing* as “The Tao that can be told is not the true Tao; names that can be named are not true names” (37). Maugham’s allusions to Daoism are scattered across many pieces in *On a Chinese Screen*. He enjoyed reading Herbert A. Giles’s *Chuang-Tzu* (1889)<sup>70</sup> which he believed to be formative of his own ideas and writing (*OCS* 63). He mentioned Zhuangzi in ‘A Student of the Drama’ as an irony of the Chinese scholar, alluding to the Spirit of the Ocean’s remark to the Spirit of the River about the latter’s limitation (Giles 159; *OCS* 120). He even quoted Zhuangzi in a compassionate sketch of the hardworking Chinese coolies, ‘The Beast of Burden’:

*To be harassed by the wear and tear of life, and to pass rapidly through it without the possibility of arresting one’s course – is not this pitiful indeed! To labour without ceasing, and then, without living to enjoy the fruit, worn out, to depart, suddenly, one knows not whither – is not that a just cause of grief?*

So wrote the Chinese mystic. (*OCS* 46, italic original)

The italic paragraph is a direct quotation from Herbert A. Giles’s translation of *Chuang-Tzu* (Giles 36), from Chapter Two ‘the Identity of Contraries’ (‘Qi Wu Lun’). This chapter

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<sup>70</sup> The old spelling of *Zhuangzi*.

explores the equality of all things – from different subjective ideas to different species – and concludes with a famous episode in which Zhuangzi dreamed of becoming a butterfly, but upon waking up, he does not know whether he is real Zhuangzi or a butterfly that dreamed of becoming Zhuangzi. The episode suggests that the distinction between self and other things, between dream and reality, is empty. Maugham certainly absorbs Zhuangzi's philosophy in his empathy with the Chinese coolies: "Their effort oppresses you. You are filled with a useless compassion." (*OCS* 46).

This section has introduced 'suggestiveness' as a fundamental aesthetic principle in traditional Chinese literature, art, and philosophy, combined with Maugham's sensitivity of the artistic capacities of Chinese people. Continuing from the 'inarticulation' method experimented in *The Moon and Sixpence*, Maugham's travel notes *On a Chinese Screen* becomes an aesthetic reservoir for further development of 'silence' in landscape descriptions and experimentation with Daoist ideas in *The Painted Veil*.

### **Daoist Epiphany**

*The Painted Veil* is "the only novel" that Maugham wrote for which he "started from a story rather than from a character" (*PV* ix). While a student at St Thomas' Hospital, Maugham spent an Easter vacation in Italy and learned Italian from his landlady's daughter, who told the story of Pia's husband's revenge on his adulterous wife in Dante's *Purgatorio* (*PV* ix). The plot lingered in Maugham's mind for twenty years. It was only on making a long journey to China that he completed the novel, *The Painted Veil*, featuring an adulterous heroine's spiritual progress amidst a Chinese background (*PV* ix).

The characters in *The Painted Veil* were "chosen to fit the story" as the plot evolved (*PV* ix). Due to this method of composition, the novel has been criticised for its flat characterisation. For example, Laurence Brander critiques that "it is work in two dimensions and successful story-telling is in three [...] it has everything but reality and

vitality” (Brander 71). Similarly, Richard Cordell writes: “The characters in *The Painted Veil* are trivial and dull; their adventures of marital infidelity [...] and self-sacrifice are shopworn and banal” (Cordell 143). However, these scholars fail to recognise the deep affinity with Chinese philosophy embedded in the novel. I argue that this novel’s ‘two-dimensional’ effect resembles the unfolding of a Chinese landscape scroll: significant meaning exists beyond mere presentation of plot and landscape. Through ‘impressions’ perceived by the heroine’s eyes in China, elusive meanings of Daoism are suggested, pointing to the in-between status of Dao, between Being and Non-being, the ‘emptiness’ that undoes the East–West binary and suggests philosophical fullness.

The novel’s title comes from a Percy Bysshe Shelley sonnet: “Lift not the painted veil which those who live / Call life.” (Shelley 34). On first glance, this line seems to instruct readers not to lift the painted veil of life. In fact, Shelley’s view on poetic language is quite the opposite: he emphasises the importance of apprehending the beautiful transitions in life (a moment that can arise through poetic language) as a resistance to a bleak life and shallow understanding (Schmolke 14). Shelley wrote in *Defense of Poetry*: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (Schmolke 1), meaning that poetic epiphany sublimates one’s spirit from a monotonous life and achieves spiritual liberation. In Chinese aesthetics, the image of a ‘veil’ functions similarly to Shelley’s ‘hidden beauty’: the veil that covers the face makes a beauty half-visible and half-invisible, registering Presence and Absence at the same time, evoking the viewers’ imagination. Maugham’s reference to Shelley implies ‘beauty’ as the theme of his novel: only when the heroine understands beauty can she understand life.

The heroine of this novel, Kitty Fane, has been strongly affected by her mother’s capitalist mindset and materialist pursuits, features of Western civilisation which Maugham frequently criticised. The opening chapters characterise Kitty as a beautiful but frivolous and shallow young woman, who grows up with her mother’s ambition for a brilliant

marriage (*PV* 15). Her mother, Mrs Garstin, is a “hard, cruel, managing, ambitious, parsimonious and stupid” woman (*PV* 12), who despises her mediocre solicitor husband, holds numerous dinner parties to prepare for her daughters’ marriage. Knowing that her younger sister has become engaged to a baronet, in a panic, Kitty accepted the proposal of Walter Fane, a Doctor of Medicine and government bacteriologist stationed in Hong Kong, with the wish to escape her family. In Hong Kong, Kitty falls for the superficial Assistant Colonial Secretary, Charles Townsend, and develops an adulterous relationship. The characterisations of Kitty, Mrs Garstin, and Charles are symptomatic of an overemphasis on physical appearance and social success while neglecting spiritual fulfillment in the modern West, a tendency articulated in T. S. Eliot’s famous poem ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925): “We are the hollow men. We are the stuffed men, leaning together, headpiece filled with straw.” (*Eliot* 75) Mrs Garstin’s hollow pursuit for social status and fortune passes down to Kitty and shapes her early life with superficial cultural habits and expectations. Though beautiful, she does not understand the inner beauty of human heart.

Kitty’s husband Walter Fane, a “restrained, cold and self-possessed man” (*PV* 27) devotedly love Kitty. Their married life is unhappy: Kitty likes dancing, tennis, and theatre, but Walter likes reading Chinese history and visiting art galleries. After discovering Kitty’s adultery, Walter gave Kitty two options: divorce and marry Charles Townsend or accompany Walter to Mei-tan-fu, a city in mainland China where cholera is rife. Upon finding out that Charles had no intention to marry her, Kitty set off desperately to Mei-tan-fu with her husband. There, Kitty works in a French Catholic convent managed by Mother Superior and cares for unwanted girls abandoned by poor Chinese families. Meanwhile, she establishes a friendship with the wise and responsible Deputy Commissioner Mr Waddington, who has married a Manchu wife. Influenced by their kindness and conscience against death looming in the village, Kitty comes to notice Walter’s “capacity for loving” (*PV* 105) and repents her past thoughts and behaviour. On the contrary, Walter,

heartbroken at Kitty's infidelity, is devastated and buries himself in experiments, in the course of which he fatally contracts cholera. Following Mrs Garstin's death, pregnant Kitty returns to England to reunite with her father and becomes hopeful for her new life and that of her coming child.

*The Painted Veil* is narrated in a third-person limited perspective, mainly in free indirect style, which is omniscient and partial at once, enabling the reader to "see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language" (Wood 9). Many characters and images – sampans, coolies, Catholic nuns, and countryside landscapes – are evidently adapted from Maugham's travel notes *On a Chinese Screen*, but in *The Painted Veil*, these are 'presented' through Kitty's eyes, often associated with her strong emotions. The Chinese landscape unfolds in Kitty's subjective processing of 'impressions', a technique similar to Conrad's and Henry James's literary impressionism.

On her way to Mei-tan-fu, Kitty is overwhelmed by her frustration with Charles Townsend, her unbearable loneliness, and her fear of cholera and death. These emotions translate into her uneasiness at the sight of an archway, the Chinese memorial in compliment of a scholar or a virtuous widow: "Yet she knew not why, it made her uneasy; it had a significance which she felt but could not put into words: was it a menace that she vaguely discerned or was it derision?" (*PV* 74) She becomes afraid when passing a grove of bamboo: "It gave her the sensation that some one hidden among them was watching her as she passed" (*PV* 74). Unlike bamboo reminding Maugham of Chinese painting in his travel notes, free indirect style tints Chinese scenery with Kitty's pathetic emotions.

After a night "tortured with strange dreams" of loss and death (*PV* 79), Kitty sees sunrise above the misty river and perceives Beauty for the first time:

The dawn had just broken and from the river rose a white mist shrouding the junks that lay moored close to one another like peas in a pod. There were hundreds of them, and they were silent, mysterious in that ghostly light, and

you had a feeling that their crews lay under an enchantment, for it seemed that it was not sleep, but something strange and terrible, that held them so still and mute.

[...] in a moment, out of the mist, looming vastly and touched here and there by a yellow ray of sun, there was seen a cluster of green and yellow roofs. Huge they seemed and you could make out no pattern; the order, if order there was, escaped you; wayward and extravagant, but of an unimaginable richness. This was no fortress, nor a temple, but the magic palace of some emperor of the gods where no man might enter. It was too airy, fantastic and unsubstantial to be the work of human hands; it was the fabric of a dream.

The tears ran down Kitty's face and she gazed, her hands clasped to her breast and her mouth, for she was breathless, open a little. She had never felt so light of heart and it seemed to her as though her body were a shell that lay at her feet and she pure spirit. Here was Beauty. She took it as the believer takes in his mouth the wafer which is God. (*PV* 80-81)

The second-person narrative creates literary impressionism by inviting readers into Kitty's perspective of the misty landscape, a similar effect to Dr Macphail's sensations of the rain analysed in Chapter Two. In Mei-tan-fu, 'you' see the silent but magnificent junks; 'you' feel 'something strange and terrible'; 'you' see the sunlight break the mist and colour the temple yellow and green hues. The 'mist', like traditional techniques in Chinese painting, blurs the boundary between dream and reality, between Kitty's presence and transcendence. It transports Kitty from her own misery to the realm of Beauty, which exists beyond words and reason. Understanding Beauty, Kitty achieves a Kantian state of aesthetic freedom: "of all these three kinds of liking [for the Agreeable, the Good, and the Beautiful], only the liking involved in taste for the beautiful is disinterested and *free*, since we are not compelled

to give our approval by any interest, whether of sense or of reason” (Kant et al. 52, italic original). Her disembodied feeling that her heart is light and her existence is pure spirit detached from her body signifies an aesthetic moment, free from any personal interest, practical purpose, or sentimental entanglement that troubles her in the material world.

Maugham’s essay ‘Reflections on a Certain Book’, collected in *The Vagrant Mood*, introduces the Kantian notion of Beauty delineated in the *Critique of Judgement*. Maugham summarises that Kantian beauty “does not reside in the object” – it is “the name we give to the specific feeling of pleasure which the object gives us,” a subjective judgement that does not rely on a concept (*VM* 167–69). Maugham emphasises that pleasure is a feeling and must depend on the idiosyncrasies of the observer, leading to his refutation of Kant’s idea that the beautiful “is liked universally” (Kant et al. 64). Maugham finds Kant’s universal validity of aesthetic judgement unconvincing because “the peculiarity of feeling is that it is not communicable” (*VM* 171). He immediately gives an example: “If I am looking at Giorgione’s *Virgin Enthroned* at Castel France, I can, if I have any gift of expression, *tell* you what I feel about it, but I cannot make you *feel* my feeling” (*VM* 171, italic original). Maugham also disagrees with Kant’s moralist statement that “beauty is the symbol of morality” (*VM* 192). He insists that in “those whom Kant calls connoisseurs of taste” we seldom find “the modesty, the tolerance, the loving-kindness and liberality” as informed by Kant’s aesthetic pleasures (*VM* 192). Maugham’s vignette ‘The Cabinet Minister’ mentioned earlier in this chapter describes a “corrupt, inefficient, and unscrupulous” (*OCS* 10) cabinet minister who has an exquisite taste for Chinese painting and calligraphy.

In this sense, Kitty’s aesthetic pleasure is her private feeling, separate from her morality and externalised in her ‘impressions’ of the Chinese scenery. The misty sunrise broadens her spiritual world. It is an epiphanic moment dawning on Kitty that something important exists beyond the world she has known, her mother’s superficial world of dinner parties and pursuit for higher social status. She comes to understand that her world in

England is provincial while China is vast. The Catholic nuns, Waddington, and Walter, engage with China in their own cross-cultural kindness, opening the door for Kitty to understand the larger world and the beauty of the human heart. She volunteers to work in the convent, which is “a refreshment to her spirit” (*PV* 118). She is surprised to hear from the nuns that her friend Waddington, who has lived in China for twenty years, has a Manchu wife. Kitty tells Waddington: “I feel like some one who’s lived all his life by a duck-pond and suddenly is shown the sea [...] I think my soul hankers for the unknown” (*PV* 131). Here Kitty’s adventurous courage is closest to Maugham’s modernist hero, like Philip Carey, who is willing to explore the world outside England to seek something new. Kitty then asks Waddington if she could see this Manchu lady: she believes this lady is the symbol of “something that vaguely, but insistently, beckoned to her” (*PV* 131). In a later conversation, Waddington suggests that what she has been looking for is Dao:

‘I’m looking for something and I don’t quite know what it is. But I know that it’s very important for me to know it, and if I did it would make all the difference. Perhaps the nuns know it; when I’m with them I feel that they hold a secret which they will not share with me. I don’t know why it came into my head that if I saw this Manchu woman I should have an inkling of what I am looking for. Perhaps she would tell me if she could.’

[...]

‘Do you know it?’

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Tao. Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whisky and some in love. It is all the same Way and it leads nowhither.’ (*PV* 148)

Waddington’s Dao has an ‘in-between’ status. His mindset goes beyond a simplistic Eurocentric or Sinocentric mode. He denies himself the indulgence of imitating a Chinese

scholar or Sinologue, but instead has “adopted the Chinese view that the Europeans were barbarians and their life a folly: in China alone was it so led that a sensible man might discern in it a sort of reality” (*PV* 87). Through Waddington, Kitty comes to a philosophical epiphany which alters her stereotyped view of China. She used to hate Hong Kong, her house with Walter in Happy Valley, and the filthy little house off the Victoria Road where she and her lover meet (*PV* 6). The friendship with Waddington enables Kitty to view China from a new perspective: “Kitty had never heard the Chinese spoken of as anything but decadent, dirty and unspeakable. It was as though the corner of a curtain were lifted for a moment, and she caught a glimpse of a world rich with colour and significance she had not dreamt of” (*PV* 87). Waddington’s Daoist mindset allows Kitty to step out of the British convention and critically examine her culture.

Waddington’s wife, the Manchu Princess, becomes a symbol of the cultural sublime for Kitty: “She pointed enigmatically to a mystic land of the spirit” (*PV* 131). The implied historical background behind their marriage is brutal. The Manchu lady was rescued by Waddington from a massacre – most likely the overthrow of the Manchus (the Xinhai Revolution in 1911) – and fell in love with him. This revolution replaced China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing Dynasty ruled by the Manchus, with the Republic of China (ROC), and is generally believed as the historical watershed between traditional and modern China. As argued in Chapter One, Maugham identifies more with traditional China and regrets the devaluation of traditional Chinese philosophy at the time he visits China. The image of the Manchu lady symbolises Maugham’s ideal and his nostalgia for traditional China, expressed in Kitty’s impression: “She seemed more like an idol than a woman” (*PV* 145).

The interior decoration of Waddington’s house is plain and typically Chinese: “the dining-room in which they ate, the drawing-room in which they sat, were furnished with prim and solid furniture” (*PV* 145). The Manchu lady’s room is “a large, bare room with

whitewashed walls on which hung scrolls in various calligraphies. At a square table, on a stiff arm-chair, both of blackwood and heavily carved, sat the Manchu" (*PV* 145). The Manchu lady, who has an imperial bloodline, gives Kitty an impression of being exquisitely beautiful: "Her face was coated with powder and her cheeks from the eyes to the mouth heavily rouged; her plucked eyebrows were a thin dark line and her mouth was scarlet. From this mask her black, slightly slanting, large eyes burned like lakes of liquid jet" (*PV* 145). Kitty learns from Waddington that the Manchu lady sometimes paints and writes poetry. Although Kitty's understanding of Chinese culture is limited and obscure, she seems to glimpse a vast and profound spiritual world that dwarfs her own culture:

She was impressive as she sat, without embarrassment, in her beautiful clothes; and from the painted face the eyes looked out wary, self-possessed and unfathomable. She was unreal, like a picture, and yet had an elegance which made Kitty feel all thumbs. Kitty had never paid anything but passing and somewhat contemptuous attention to the China in which fate had thrown her. It was not done in her set. Now she seemed on a sudden to have an inkling of something remote and mysterious. Here was the East, immemorial, dark, and inscrutable. The beliefs and the ideals of the West seemed crude beside ideals and beliefs of which in this exquisite creature she seemed to catch a fugitive glimpse. Here was a different life, lived on a different plane. (*PV* 146).

What Kitty senses in the Manchu lady is the sublime. Maugham quotes Kant in *The Vagrant Mood*: "We call things sublime', he says, 'on the ground that they make us feel the sublimity of our own minds.' [...] We are made to feel our insignificance, but at the same time we are exalted, since, awe-struck as we may be, we are conscious that we are not limited to the world of sense, but can raise ourselves above it." (*VM* 188–89) Unlike the beautiful, which evokes a positive pleasure, Kant's sublime involves a negative pleasure (97–98). He defines

sublime as “what is *absolutely* [*schlechthin*] *large*” (Kant 103), something beyond our physical existence and verbal descriptions. Perceiving the sublime, we feel humbled in our own being but also exalted by our mind’s ability to think about it (Kant 106). In this Manchu lady, Kitty feels her insignificance, or her culture’s insignificance, the crude ‘beliefs’ of the West compared with the profundity of Chinese history and culture, but meanwhile, she feels her capacity of perceiving the sublime. This is another moment of aesthetic epiphany where Kitty’s past life seems pale and her mind expands to sublimity.

At the dawn soon after Walter’s death, Kitty’s impression of the misty river becomes threatening in her grieving mood: “There was a pale mist on the river and the masts of the crowded junks loomed through it like the lances of a phantom army” (*PV* 166). The simile of masts as a menacing image of lances recalls of Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, where the ships are perceived as monsters and the masts as bristles by the narrator in extreme hunger: “The ships whose masts I could see outlined against the sky looked, with their black bodies, like silent monsters who had raised their bristles and were laying in wait for me (68). After the burial of Walter, Kitty asks Waddington about the meaning of life and the Dao:

‘You spoke of Tao the other day,’ said Kitty, after a pause. ‘Tell me what it is.’

Waddington gave her a little look, hesitated an instant, and then with a faint smile on his comic face answered:

‘It is the Way and the Waygoer. It is the eternal road along which walk all beings, but no being made it, for itself is being. It is everything and nothing. From it all things spring, all things conform to it, and to it at last all things return. It is a square without angles, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form. [...] It is nowhere, but without looking out of the window you may see it. Desire not to desire, it teaches, and leave all things to take their course. He that humbles himself shall be preserved entire. He that bends shall be made straight. Failure is the foundation of success and success

is the lurking-place of failure; but who can tell when the turning point will come? He who strives after tenderness can become even as a little child.

Gentleness brings victory to him who attacks and safety to him who defends.

Mighty is he who conquers himself.' (*PV* 170)

Kitty does not seem to understand, and their conversation falls into silence. Waddington's long speech covers key concepts in Daoism, such as Nature and Non-Action, with reference to several chapters in *Dao De Jing*, quoted below.

Chapter 25:

There was a thing inchoate but whole,

Before Heaven and Earth.

Silent!

Without form!

Alone, unchanging,

Roaming far and wide,

Never perishing,

Mother of All-under-Heaven.

I do not know its true name,

I call it the Tao.

[...]

He models himself on Earth,

Earth on Heaven,

Heaven on the Tao,

The Tao models itself on Nature,

On the So-of-itself. (Laozi 119-20)

Chapter 41:

The Great Square has no corners.

The Great Vessel is completed slowly.

Great Music is faint.

The Great Image has no form. (Laozi 176)

Chapter 43:

The Softest thing in All-under-Heaven

Outstrips the Hardest.

Non-Being enters No-Space.

I know the benefit of Non-Action,

The Wordless Teaching. (Laozi 184)

Chapter 58:

Fortune and Calamity are part of each other,

Calamity is latent within Fortune. (Laozi 237)

What is all this about? How does Waddington's teaching function in Maugham's novel?

*Dao De Jing* proclaims at the very outset the inadequacy of words to communicate the mystery of the Dao, to convey the deeper knowledge that is no-knowledge:

The Tao that can be told is not the true Tao;

Names that can be named are not true names. (Laozi 1)

The silence after their conversation allows for wordless but infinite meaning. Like the misty dawn that appears every day but leaves different impressions on Kitty, Dao constantly changes, not limited to definite interpretation. Between Being and Non-Being, Dao is an ontological process (hence, a Way), and the Daoist Way is to dwell as a part of that natural process. Life is a natural process between Being and Non-Being, between Presence and Absence. *The Painted Veil* is about the Dao of Kitty's life.

The recognition of Dao liberates Kitty from Presence, her material and emotional bondage, and endows her with Absence, a sense of freedom:

But what did Charles Townsend matter?

Like a rich melody on a harp that rang in exultant arpeggios through the complicated harmonies of a symphony, one thought beat in her heart insistently. It was this thought which gave their exotic beauty to the rice-fields, which made a little smile break on her pale lips as a smooth-faced lad swung past her on his way to the market town with exultation in his carriage and audacity in his eyes, and which gave the magic of a tumultuous life to the cities she passed through. [...] Freedom! That was the thought that sung in her heart so that even though the future was so dim, it was iridescent like the mist over the river where the morning sun fell upon it. Freedom! (*PV* 181–82)

The images of mist, rice-fields, and river reappear like a Chinese landscape painting. Landscape elements (presence, rice-fields and river) emerge from the empty space (absence, mist) and vanish back into the emptiness. Presence and Absence are different ways of seeing Dao: “either as a single formless tissue that is somehow always generative, or as that tissue in its ten thousand distinct and always changing forms” (Hinton “Introduction”). Kitty’s prospect of the future is in the misty state of emptiness, between dim and bright, generative of a myriad of possibilities. ‘Freedom,’ her mind exclaims, twice. This passage reaches another modernist moment similar to Philip Carey’s refrain in *Of Human Bondage*. With her Chinese eyes, Kitty sees life with a new perspective, one different from her English conventions, from her upbringing of snobbishness and dinner parties. She has transformed from her previous self who held a dismissive stereotype of China to someone who can appreciate Chinese landscape and human kindness. The Dao fulfills Kitty’s spiritual world.

Back in London, Kitty’s father is offered a post of Chief Justice of the Bahamas in the Caribbean. Kitty decides to leave England for the unknown with him: “London means nothing to me any more. I couldn’t breathe here” (*PV* 210). This opportunity also means a new beginning for her father: “the death of his wife had filled him with relief and now this

chance to break entirely with the past had offered him freedom" (*PV* 210). Kitty hopes her child will be a girl so that Kitty can bring up her daughter to be a person "independent of others because she is possessed of herself" (*PV* 213). She confesses to her father that she has made mistakes and has been punished, but now she has "hope and courage" (*PV* 213).

In the final paragraph of the novel, Kitty thinks of the road leading to Mei-tan-fu, a fearful road leading to Walter's death. The stunning sunrise brings beauty and hope:

The sun rose, dispelling the mist, and she saw winding onwards as far as the eye could reach, among the rice-fields, across a little river and through undulating and follies, the unhappiness she had suffered, were not entirely vain if she could follow the path that now she dimly discerned before her, not the path that kind funny old Waddington had spoken of that led nowhither, but the path those dear nuns at the convent followed so humbly, the path that led to peace. (*PV* 213).

The image of mist and Waddington's Dao appear for the last time. This is Maugham's deliberate reminder for attentive readers of the philosophical meaning of his Chinese novel. The ending is an evocative Chinese painting: across misty river and rice-fields, where the sun rises and a road leads to somewhere unknown, a road that appears in Presence but leads to Absence. Kitty still does not fully understand what Waddington means by 'the Way that leads nowhither', but she already finds her own path, a path of independence that leads to peace.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Language**

In *The Painted Veil*, the misty landscape and unspoken meaning point to the empty Dao, and equally point to Kitty's progress to spiritual fullness. Without understanding Dao, readers cannot fully understand the Chinese aesthetic and philosophy that provides the foundation of the novel, or Maugham's experimentation with the limits of language.

Maugham's literary experiments of silence are on the cusp of modernism. This chapter starts with the inarticulate painter in *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919) and ends with *The Painted Veil* (1925). Earlier, in *Of Human Bondage* (1915), Maugham concludes the novel with a semi-silent moment: when Philip walks with Sally in a tranquil night and plans to propose to her, "the silence was on a sudden pregnant with meaning" (*HB* 664). Maugham compares Sally's voice to that of the country night, echoing a Daoist tendency to model the human world on Nature: "He was afraid that Sally by speaking would break the spell, but she said never a word, and he wanted to hear the sound of her voice. Its low richness was the voice of the country night itself." (*HB* 664). Later, in *The Razor's Edge* (1944), the protagonist Larry Darrell experiences a silent moment of aesthetical epiphany at sunrise during his residency in India, similar to that of Kitty Fane in China: "How can I tell you what I felt? No words can tell the ecstasy of my bliss" (*RE* 276). As I will discuss in Chapter Four, *Of Human Bondage* and *The Razor's Edge* can be also read as philosophical novels with profound meaning only suggested beyond words.

Considering the autobiographical narrator, the Post-Impressionist art in *The Moon and Sixpence*, and the misty landscape in *The Painted Veil*, similarities emerge with Longxi Zhang's analysis of the Chinese poet Tao Qian (365–427 A.D.) in *The Tao and the Logos*. The poet quit the official court and returned to his garden to lead a hermit farmer's life, because of his "aversion to the insincerity and the pretentiousness of officialdom, [...] his appreciation of the simple joys of his home and his garden, his love for nature, and the purity of spirit revealed in the purity of his language" (Longxi Zhang *The Tao and the Logos* 113). In addition, Tao Qian's poems appear to be autobiographical in their descriptions of the poet's peaceful life as a farmer in his seclusion, though the farmer image does not equate to the real Tao Qian. Longxi Zhang quotes studies from two authoritative sinologists, Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, stating that Tao's poetry is "poised between the poles of factuality and fiction" and that its power lies precisely in this dual function" (*The*

*Tao and the Logos* 115). Therefore, “inevitable discrepancy” exists between the poet’s appearance of being a farmer and his desire to be a farmer,” and Tao Qian “is not the naïve and straightforward poet he claims to be” (116). The “true self” of Tao Qian is outside any textual construction, while the persona of the “farmer-recluse” Tao Qian in his poetry is a “hermeneutic identity”, a term taken from Gadamer meaning an identity not outside but within his text (Longxi Zhang *The Tao and the Logos* 117). Similarly, Maugham’s persona, the autobiographical narrator in *The Moon and Sixpence* and his other fiction is a “hermeneutic identity”.

We see a gap between the real Maugham and the narrator Maugham. The author Maugham views the journey to the East as his (and his characters’) ‘return to nature’ for personal liberation, while the narrator Maugham, constrained by the publishing context of his time, pretends that he does not understand the main character’s motives or philosophy. The ‘hermeneutic identity’ Maugham builds in his text resists any realistic reading of his fiction: whether it is any actual event or person in the real world. Like the antithesis implied in Tao Qian’s poetry, being a governmental official versus being a recluse farmer, Maugham poses two ways of life in both *The Moon and Sixpence* and *The Painted Veil*: following social obligations in England versus seeking spiritual fulfilment outside England. Strickland and Kitty eventually find their inner peace in the East, returning to the Daoist ‘natural’ state of being a human. *On a Chinese Screen*, also narrated by the autobiographical Maugham persona, provides direct evidence of Maugham’s familiarisation with Daoist aesthetic and raw materials that would develop into *The Painted Veil*. Maugham’s transcultural characters, Walter, Waddington, and the Catholic nuns, have immeasurable love and kindness that transcend the binary of East and West. By contrast, Mrs Garstin, Charles Townsend, and Mrs Strickland, who hold onto English conventions, are shaped as antagonists.

Like Tao Qian’s poetry, Maugham’s fiction is by no means to be taken at face value. Travel to China and the assimilation of Chinese thinking provides a Daoist method for

Maugham to experiment with the limits of language. Chinese philosophy also provides an opportunity for Maugham's Western characters to move from what they perceive as a West compromised by materialism to the East which offers spiritual growth. My next chapter will further explore Maugham's engagement with Eastern philosophy, which was fulfilled in India eighteen years after his journey to China.

## Chapter Four

### Indian Thought: The Path to Liberation

“You should stop off in India,” he said, “The East has more to teach the West than the West conceives.”

W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge*, 1944

“Indian wisdom flows back to Europe and will change the very foundations of our knowledge and thought.”

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1818

“And how should he explain it? As in the sky:  
Stars, darkness, a lamp, a phantom, dew, a bubble.  
A dream, a flash of lightning, and a cloud—thus we should look upon the world (all that was made).  
Thus he should explain; therefore it is said: He should explain.”

*The Diamond Sutra*<sup>71</sup>

#### Introduction: The Maugham Library

On the morning of 22 April 2025, I visited the Maugham Library at the King's School, Canterbury, where Maugham attended Junior School in 1885 and where he was buried after his death in 1965 (Figure 23). The Maugham Library was built in 1958, housing around 1,800 volumes of personal books Maugham donated to the school, and was officially opened by Maugham himself on 21 September 1961. At the opening of his Library, Maugham addressed the school: “The books that I am giving you are the working materials of the author I have been.”<sup>72</sup> The Maugham Library's primary value lies in the light it sheds on Maugham as a writer and as a man. This is apparent particularly in the inscriptions in

<sup>71</sup> Translation from Sanskrit to English by Max Muller. Cited from <https://www.vincentpoon.com/diamond-sutra-ix.html>. Accessed 4 May 2025.

<sup>72</sup> W. Somerset Maugham, ‘Speech to the King's School’, 21 September 1961. From the King's School Archives.

the books, in the annotations, and, in a few cases, in the manuscripts and mementoes left inside the books.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 23. W. Somerset Maugham's burial place in the King's School <sup>74</sup>

The Maugham Library contains a wide range of English literature and European literature. Of the remaining categories, Philosophy is the largest and the most significant.

<sup>73</sup> Peter G. Henderson, 'W. Somerset Maugham, 1889–1989', *The Cantuarian*, August 1989, pp. 173–74. From the King's School Archives.

<sup>74</sup> Photo by the author, 24 April 2025, at the King's School, Canterbury.

One of Maugham's earliest books dated to 1893, according to his inscription, is a collection of Arthur Schopenhauer's essays. Chapter One touched upon the crucial influence of Indian philosophy on Schopenhauer's philosophy. The Maugham Library contains several Indian books heavily annotated by Maugham, including influential works even today in Indian philosophy: S. Radhakrishnan's two volumes of *Indian Philosophy* (1929) and an edited volume of *The Principal Upanishads* (1953), T. W. Rhys Davids's *Buddhism: Its History and Literature* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, inscribed 'W S Maugham. Aug. 1922'), Mrs Rhys Davids's *Buddhism* (1870), and three volumes of *The Cultural Heritage of India, Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Memorial* (1936).

This chapter begins with Maugham's early philosophical engagement with Schopenhauer, which sustains *Of Human Bondage*, and moves on to his deployment of Indian philosophy in his two later novels, *The Narrow Corner* (1932) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944). Specifically, Maugham's Indian philosophy includes Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta. These philosophies, as articulated by John M. Koller in his book *The Indian Way*, cover a core Indian perspective centred on freedom, "of liberation from bondage to suffering and fragmented existence" (10). These concepts at the centre of Indian thought resonate with the central theme in Maugham's life and work, addressing the key problem of human bondage and freedom, as well as futile suffering and contingent human existence.

The first section of this chapter examines the unmistakable impact of Schopenhauer on Maugham's early literary endeavours, with a particular focus on *Of Human Bondage* and the earlier manuscript, 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey'. This philosophical exploration is crucial as it lays the groundwork for understanding Maugham's pessimistic worldview, which permeates nearly all his works. Tracing this intellectual journey will delineate how Schopenhauer's philosophy initially shaped Maugham's outlook on life, underpinning his lifelong, profound engagement with Indian philosophy. The second section uncovers Maugham's undervalued novel *The Narrow Corner* and its manuscript 'The

Fugitive', parts of which are set in Sydney and the seas north of Australia. Compared with its manuscript, the published novel reflects a progression in Maugham's thinking influenced by his deepening understanding of the Buddhist idea of impermanence. The third section explores Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* and essay 'The Saint', incorporating his extensive reading of Advaita Vedanta and his journey to India in 1938. The novel explores the knowledge of the ultimate reality (Brahman) and self (Atman) as a way of liberation. This chronological approach enables a nuanced observation of Maugham's philosophical progression, from the early influence of Schopenhauer to the later exploration of Indian philosophy, from the West to the essential concepts of the East.

Maugham's reading of Indian philosophy continues after the publication of *The Razor's Edge*. Maugham originally planned another visit to India before writing the novel, but the plan was thwarted by the Second World War. In a letter dated 3 December<sup>75</sup> archived at the King's School, Maugham wrote:

There is not as much of India in it as I had first intended to put. I was going to India when the war broke out in order to get the rest of the material I wanted, + I delayed writing the book in the hope that the war would not last long + I might still be able to carry out my first intention. But when it was evident that there would be no possibility of this, I felt that at my advanced age I could not afford to wait + so I made up my mind to use what material I had. I hate to fake + so altered my original plan accordingly. ("Miscellaneous Letters")

Maugham was never able to reach India again. My archival research in the Maugham Library located hundreds of Maugham's autograph annotations in the books on Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta, which later develops into his two philosophical novels and one essay 'The Saint'. In particular, Maugham was interested in an eighth-century Indian philosopher

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<sup>75</sup> I infer the year to be 1943. *The Razor's Edge* was published in January 1944.

Shankara and was originally planning to write *The Razor's Edge* as a serious book about Shankara's last days in a monastery, as he told Christopher Isherwood in January 1941. He leaves over seventy notes in a book chapter on Shankara's philosophy and consistently refers to him in *The Razor's Edge* and in one of his letters to Isherwood. In that letter dated in July 1943, Maugham decided using 'The Razor's Edge', a phrase from *Katha-Upanishad*, as the title of his new novel and asked Isherwood for Shankara's commentary to confirm his understanding. Combined with the fifteen letters between Maugham and Isherwood discussing key concepts of Vedanta, housed in the Isherwood Collection at the Huntington Library (ten letters) and the Somerset Maugham Collection at the Boston University (five letters), the annotations preserved in the Maugham Library connect the missing parts in these letters and provide the first-hand evidence of Maugham's serious study of Indian philosophy.

My discussions of all the three novels covered in this chapter are based on a solid archival methodology. I trace the progression between 'The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey' and *Of Human Bondage*, between 'The Fugitive' and *The Narrow Corner*, between Maugham's notes on Advaita Vedanta and *The Razor's Edge*, in consideration of Maugham's intellectual journey of reading philosophy as a path to liberation.

### **Of Human Suffering**

Maugham underwent a profound intellectual awakening at the age of seventeen when reading the works of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer, deeply influenced by Indian thought, often incorporates quotations from the *Vedas* and the Buddha in his seminal work *The World as Will and Representation*. Maugham's first sustained encounter with Schopenhauer's philosophy occurred in Kuno Fischer's lectures at Heidelberg University in 1890, an event vividly recounted in many of Maugham's biographies and his memoir *The Summing Up*. Maugham remembered Fischer, the renowned authority on Schopenhauer, as

“a dapper, short, stoutish man, neat in his dress, with a bullet head, white hair *en brosse* and a red face [...]” and recounted that Fischer treated Schopenhauer “as a work of art rather than as a serious contribution to metaphysics” (*SU* 232–33). Although Maugham, at his young age, may not have fully comprehended Fischer’s lectures, he gained a muddled sense of the dramatic and romantic qualities of Schopenhauer’s philosophical system (*SU* 233).

Schopenhauer’s philosophy resonated with Maugham’s early life full of suffering, marked by the death of his mother and a torturous childhood in Whitstable and at the King’s School, Canterbury. Jeffrey Meyers, in his biography of Maugham, notes that Schopenhauer’s pessimism, which contends that human beings were victims of their instincts and dismisses free will, strongly appealed to the young Maugham (46). Another biographer, Ted Morgan, underscores how Schopenhauer alleviated Maugham’s obscure guilt over his mother’s death, offering a worldview that found no ordering reason in the universe and provided no explanation for human tragedy (24). *Of Human Bondage* describes a scene of Philip Carey studying Schopenhauer during Kuno Fischer’s lectures, which is “almost completely autobiographical” according to Cordell (93). This explicit tribute to the philosopher encapsulates Philip’s introduction to philosophy and his pessimistic view of life: “The pessimism of the subject attracted his youth; and he believed that the world he was about to enter was a place of pitiless woe and of darkness” (*HB* 136).

Maugham’s earliest mature written reflection on human suffering dates to 1896. When he was a medical student at the St Thomas’ Hospital, he wrote in his notebook: “Everything in life is meaningless, the pain and the suffering are fruitless and futile. There is no object in life. To nature nothing matters but the continuation of the species” (*WN* 29). *Of Human Bondage* centres on human suffering, but meanwhile explores ways that artistic and philosophical contemplation could liberate individuals from the bleak human condition and enable them to face death peacefully and courageously. The novel charts Philip’s spiritual progression, from a susceptible and indecisive boy to a grown-up with intellect and

freedom. The novel's conclusion, where Philip and Sally are engaged, symbolises a new chapter in Philip's life. This ending concludes the central plot of Philip's quest for a philosophy that will free him from intellectual and emotional bondage. As Cordell observes, this philosophical journey is portrayed as the key to facing life with "equanimity, courage, and humour" (97). This newfound resilience is similar to the equanimity and courage toward life evoked in the final pages of *The World as Will and Representation*. The structure of *Of Human Bondage* resembles that of Schopenhauer's work, firstly setting up will as bondage and gradually moving towards a sense of liberation.

Schopenhauer, inheriting Kant's groundbreaking concept of the 'thing-in-itself', developed 'will' as the basis of his philosophical interpretation of the human world. At the age of seventeen, a Buddha-like epiphany stirred Schopenhauer, instigating a deep contemplation on life's inherent misery and wretchedness (Wicks 11). This introspection led him to reject the existence of an infinitely good God in his mature philosophical writings, asserting that the world could only be the creation of a cruel devil (Wicks 11). Similarly, Maugham gave up God as a pupil at the King's School: "I no longer believed in God; I still, in my bones, believed in the Devil" (*SU* 243). The understanding of suffering allows Schopenhauer to move away from the philosophical trend of optimism and belief in a rational will popular at his time – especially Fichte – to the irrational facet of will (Wicks 10).

In 1813, Schopenhauer completed his doctoral dissertation *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, which he frequently references in subsequent works discussing the intellectual nature of perception. He elucidates that our senses, capturing meagre data, instantaneously and automatically generate a mental *representation* of the external world with all its diverse features (*WWR* xiv). He argues that the *a priori* nature of time, space, and causality constitutes three inherent functions of our intellect, serving as inseparable prerequisites for knowledge (*WWR* xiv). The connection between our representations is *a*

*priori* that can be expressed by the principle of sufficient reason in four classes: 1) causality: if the cause is given, the effect must follow; 2) concepts: if certain premisses are given, the conclusion must follow; 3) space and time: the existence of one relation inevitably implies the other; 4) actions: a definite course of action inevitably ensues on a given character and motive (*WWR* xiv–xv). These contentions deal with only *representations*, things that appear to us in their physical forms, not the Kantian thing-in-itself, which will be developed into Schopenhauer's *will*.

After completing this dissertation, Schopenhauer delved into philosophical-religious works from India. Reading the *Bhagavadgita* in December 1813 and the *Upanishads* in March 1814 marked a pivotal transition in his intellectual journey (Wicks 12). Already influenced by the ideas of Plato, Kant, and Shakespeare that the world is illusory and dreamlike, Schopenhauer found illumination in the Indian texts, glimpsing the possibility of achieving liberation and enlightenment by avoiding excessive entanglement with either the external, dreamlike world or the inner nature as the source of appearances (Wicks 12). By the end of 1814, Schopenhauer had formulated most of his key ideas. The following four years (1814–1818) were dedicated to writing *The World as Will and Representation*, the philosopher's *magnum opus* that crystallises his philosophical insights after absorbing profound wisdom from India. In his 'Preface to the First Edition', Schopenhauer declares that the *Vedas*, introduced to Europeans at the beginning of the nineteenth century through the *Upanishads*, represents the greatest advantage of this era over previous centuries (*WWR* xxiii). He frequently quotes the Indian material in this work.

Schopenhauer asserts, at the very beginning of *The World as Will and Representation*, that "The world is my representation" (*WWR* 3), meaning that the world before us is only registered by our immediate perceptions and the sea of memories. Book One extensively contends that intuition precedes conception. Building on the principles established *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Schopenhauer posits that true knowledge is

*a priori*, while representations cannot be directly intuited, and concepts merely serve as abstract representations (*WWR* 1 63). In this framework, Schopenhauer challenges the value of scientific, objective views of things, contending that such perspectives fall short of providing metaphysical knowledge. Instead, he advocates for delving beyond the superficial, objective surface of things to uncover philosophical truths inwardly (Wicks 17).

Meanwhile, Schopenhauer also asserts that “The world is my will” (*WWR* 4). Schopenhauer’s *will* denotes the raw, blind, driving urge that governs the human body and the natural world, revealing the inner reality of things and functioning as the thing-in-itself. Schopenhauer initiates his reasoning with the body of a knowing subject, which simultaneously serves as a representation – an object among others – and will – an intuition. Consequently, the actions of the body are determined by the manifestations of the will: “the action of the body is nothing but the act of will objectified” (*WWR* 100). Schopenhauer extends this reasoning to propose that all other representations must share a similar inner reality; without this shared aspect, “his perceptual field would be riddled with absurdities” (Wicks 17). Therefore, the world we live in is full of meaningless representations, mere objectivation of *will* under the contingent circumstances. The following two Books, Book Three and Book Four, explore the pursuit of temporary relief and salvation from the constant desires and disillusionment in life. In this context, the first half of *The World as Will and Representation* describes the human condition as a prison of incessant desire, portraying inevitable constraints, while the second half focuses on the quest for freedom (Wicks 17).

For Schopenhauer, life comes out of will and returns to will. A person is “thrown into space and time” and his existence is nothing but “a constant dying” (*WWR* 1 337). In *Of Human Bondage*, the meaninglessness of life is manifested through meaningless death. Lawrence Brander points out that Fanny Price is the first symbol in the book of the meaninglessness of life, for she toils and suffers without achieving significance, loves

without grace, and dies without leaving an impact on anyone at all (30). Philip Carey's poet friend Cronshaw, who leads a pleasurable and decadent life, dies of poverty and illness before his first collection of poems is published. Philip starts to reflect on the blind force that governs life: "Men hurried hither and thither, urged by forces they knew not; and the purpose of it all escaped them; they seemed to hurry just for hurrying's sake" (*HB* 464). Here 'the forces' that propel people to do things, meaningless and purposeless, is a manifestation of *will*. Knowing his friend and mentor Hayward, an idealistic enthusiast for *avant-garde* literature and art, has set out for the Boer War, Philip ponders "It looked as though men were puppets in the hands of an unknown force, which drove them to do this and that; and sometimes they used their reason to justify their actions; and when this was impossible they did the actions in despite of reason" (*HB* 543). The longstanding metaphor of puppetry, where individuals are portrayed as manipulated by an unknown force, has deep philosophical roots, from Plato's cave allegory to its recurrent appearance in novels and philosophy. This metaphor emphasises the inherent inevitability of *will*, objectified in human behaviours that sometimes operate beyond the control of reason. Hayward eventually dies of enteric in the South African campaign, a stupid, meaningless end to a wasted life (Brander 32).

In Section 54 of Book Four of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer defines the affirmation and the denial of the will. The *affirmation of the will* allows a complete surrender of the will to its representation, while the *denial of the will* gives way to knowledge, thus the will undergoes a process of quieting and eventual self-abolishment (*WWR* 285). Schopenhauer argues that the sexual drive is "the strongest and most decisive affirmation of life" (*WWR* 1 356). Of all the human strivings, Schopenhauer contends, self-preservation is the foremost and ultimate purpose, as it is in the animal instinct. Maugham's short stories and plays dramatize tragedies resulting from the sexual drive, as evident in 'Rain', 'The Book-bag', 'Force of Circumstance', *The Letter*, *East of Suez*, among others. This

theme persists across Maugham's novels, from *Liza of Lambeth* to his renowned ones *Of Human Bondage*, *The Painted Veil*, *Cakes and Ale*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, where sexual desires play a significant role in shaping the character and the narrative. Nonetheless, these novels do not fall into commonplace because 1) the love affair in Maugham's novels often end with disillusion or unsatisfaction; 2) Maugham explores deeper themes behind the sexual relationship: *Liza of Lambeth* reveals the grim condition of slums, *Cakes and Ale* exposes the hypocrisy in the literary circle, *The Painted Veil* incorporates Daoist aesthetics, *The Moon and Sixpence* and *Of Human Bondage* delves into the realm of art and philosophy.

Willing and desiring are essential to life, fully compared to an "unquenchable thirst" (Schopenhauer *WWR* 1 338). At the core of willing lies need, lack, or want, which gives rise to pain, and once the need is fulfilled, it subsequently leads to emptiness and boredom. Therefore, a life that affirms will "swings back and forth like a pendulum between pain and boredom" (Schopenhauer *WWR* 1 338). Maugham reveals such a will-driven life of 'emptiness and boredom' notably in the first half of *The Painted Veil*, discussed in the previous chapter. Another example is Philip Carey's desire for the teashop girl Mildred in *Of Human Bondage*, the counterpart of Stephen's love for Rosie Cameron in the 'Stephen Carey' manuscript. The physical descriptions of Rosie resemble those of Mildred; she has a small figure, dark hair, small mouth, unpassionate lips, pallid complexion, straight nose ("ATSC"). The plots of the two versions are similar: Rosie/Mildred is going to marry another man (Todd/Miller), leaving the young protagonist in intense pain. Later, Rosie/Mildred comes back, abandoned and pregnant, evoking fervent love from the protagonists who, despite limited means, cares for her. While Stephen confronts Todd in his office with a heroic and romantic speech, Philip faces a more agonising situation as Mildred falls in love with his friend Griffiths. Devastated, Philip forgives Griffith and Mildred, because they are "the helpless instruments of blind chance" and cannot help themselves (*HB* 676). The phrase 'blind chance' exactly refers to Schopenhauer's *will*. When Philip discovers

Mildred working as a prostitute in Piccadilly Circus, out of pity, he takes Mildred and her child into his rented flat. Philip, however, finds his passionate love wane and rejects Mildred's sexual request, leading to her enraged outburst with the most virulent word: "Cripple!" (*HB* 534). Because of his desire, Philip Carey's life oscillates between the pangs of not being with Mildred and moments of exultation when with Mildred. Also, as Calder observes, Mildred is the greater slave to her emotions (*Freedom* 111), because unlike Philip, she does not have the ability to overcome emotion with reason.

In the 'Stephen Carey' draft, feeling abandoned, Stephen contemplates suicide at least twice: during his night wanderings by the river, he thinks of dropping into the water and finishing his life, or firing his revolver into his head ("ATSC" 2 214). Suicide, according to Schopenhauer, is far from being denial of the will but "a phenomenon of the will's strong affirmation" (*WWR* 398). Schopenhauer believes suicide is a foolish, futile act because it is a truth that life is always certain to the will-to-live and suffering is essential to life, while by suicide, the thing-in-itself remains unaffected (*WWR* 399). Suicide only offers a merely illusory redemption from this world full of misery rather than acknowledging it. In an essay 'On Suicide', Schopenhauer compares suicide to an experiment attempting to force an answer, through death, to the profound questions regarding existence and human cognition. However, he deems it as a clumsy experiment because the identity of the consciousness would never be around to hear the answer (*PP* 2 280). Stephen Carey then deliberates: "How thoughtless and ungrateful the world is! And it would be vulgar to commit suicide" ("ATSC" 2 215). In *Of Human Bondage*, the more honest autobiographical work, the protagonist's suicidal thoughts are entirely absent. One possible reason might be the profound influence of Voltaire's *Candide* on Maugham, where the protagonist undergoes much suffering but persists and moves forward. Maugham acknowledged years later that before starting a novel, he would read *Candide* over again so he could have in the back of his mind the touchstone of its lucidity, grace and wit (*SU* 237–38).

Schopenhauer, having elucidated the entanglements of the will in the initial two Books of *The World as Will and Representation*, explores pathways to liberation in the subsequent two Books. Book Three argues that the experience of beauty can temporarily elevate a person from the mundane realm of desires and fleeting contentment to a blissful moment where time seems to come to a standstill (Wicks 18). Book Four, on the other hand, propounds the notion of complete denial of the will-to-live – a state of suspension and detachment where the world appears bereft of illusory allurements, resembling a condition of supreme liberation akin to Buddhist wisdom (Wicks 21). In both *Of Human Bondage* and the ‘Stephen Carey’ manuscript, the protagonist exults at tranquillity and beauty in the natural world, but *Of Human Bondage* reaches a contemplative denial of will, which makes the story a philosophical novel. The climax is the British Museum scene where Philip suddenly understands the futility of life, praised by Cordell “one of the most moving scenes in modern fiction” (97). Disquieted by the thought of his dead friend, observing the “infinitely touching” simplicity of the Athenian tombstones (*HB* 582) provides Philip with a moment of intellectual exultation devoid of will; he totally forgets the sufferings brought by Mildred and rejoices in his newly found freedom. Rather than a celebration of art, this scene shows how art, or aesthetic experience, provides a means by which to sublimate the will.

In artistic experiences, the knowledge of the Idea takes place, transforming the subject to be a pure *will-less* subject. At this moment, Schopenhauer writes, “we stop considering the Where, When, Why, and Wherefore of things but simply and exclusively consider the What” (*WWR* 1 201), thus devoid of abstract concepts and reasoning. The person loses individuality and exists as only a pure knowing subject, with consciousness filled by a single image of perception, *Idea*. This happens in the contemplation of the natural object, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else (*WWR* 1 201); it happens too in either form of visual arts, poetry or music, owing to art’s only goal to communicate the cognition of eternal Ideas (*WWR* 1 207–08). In his copy of *The World as*

*Will and Idea*, Maugham made detailed annotations in Book Three and jotted down notes such as ‘art’, ‘inspiration’, ‘peace through art’, ‘charming’, ‘definition of beauty’, ‘beauty is the adequate representation of will’, ‘inspiration, intuition, + aim’ and ‘the end of art’.<sup>76</sup> In Maugham’s autobiographical novel, the natural world initiates the aesthetic enlightenment for both Stephen and Philip to cast off will during their residencies in the King’s School.

In *Of Human Bondage*, Philip takes “solitary walks into the country” (*HB* 68), a phrase highly reminiscent of Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’, ‘The Recluse’ and ‘Tintern Abbey’, among others. These walks endow Philip with different emotions: wandering along the bank of a little stream that runs through the green fields gives him a “peculiar satisfaction” (*HB* 68), the rooks make him feel melancholy, and the central tower of the Canterbury Cathedral brings “a troubling delight which he could not understand” (*HB* 68). Philip articulates these strange feelings as ‘aesthetic emotion’: “he did not know if it was pain or pleasure. It was the first dawn of the aesthetic emotion” (*HB* 69). Chapter Three discussed Maugham’s evocation of Burke’s Sublime and his criticism of Kant’s idea of Beauty; the Beauty in *Of Human Bondage* is closer to that of Schopenhauer. On the book margin, Maugham marked out Schopenhauer’s definition of Beauty: “When we say that a thing is *beautiful*, we thereby assert that it is an object of our aesthetic contemplation, and this has a double meaning; on the one hand it means that the sight of the thing makes us *objective*, that is to say, that in contemplating it we are no longer conscious of ourselves as individuals, but as pure will-less subjects of knowledge; and on the other hand it means that we recognise in the object, not the particular thing, but an Idea”.<sup>77</sup> The sight of the stream and green fields transforms Philip into a will-less subject of knowledge and the ordinary

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<sup>76</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. 3 volumes. Translated by Haldane and Kemp. Published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., n.d., 7<sup>th</sup> impression; 1909, 6<sup>th</sup> impression; 1909, 6<sup>th</sup> impression. J. SCH. 1–3. Annotated by Maugham. From the King’s School Archives.

<sup>77</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. Volume 1. Translated by Haldane and Kemp. Published by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., n.d., 7<sup>th</sup> impression; 1909. Annotated by Maugham with a pencil note ‘def of beauty’. p. 270. Stored in the Maugham Library. Accessed in April 2025.

objects into the Idea, while the *sublime* Canterbury Cathedral triggers “a hostile relation” (‘troubling delight’) to Philip’s will and his body, elevating his consciousness above the will (Schopenhauer *WWR* 201–06). Philip’s aesthetic awakening liberates him from the will-bounded miseries of school life to the pure world of Idea.

Schopenhauer’s central idea of Book Four in *The World as Will and Representation*, the way to salvation from suffering, finds its roots in India (Russell 683). Here needs a brief introduction of the Four Noble Truth of the Buddha’s teaching, as follows:

Human existence is intrinsically characterized by dukkha.

Dukkha arises because of appetitive cravings and desires (negative and positive).

There can be a cessation of dukkha, known as *nirvana*.

Nirvana is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path. (Hamilton 48)

‘Dukkha’ is often translated as ‘suffering’, ‘pain’. Sue Hamilton proposes another translation ‘unsatisfactoriness’, aligning with the Buddha’s teaching that our phenomenal world of existence is impermanent (49). In his copy of T. W. Rhys Davids’s *Buddhism*, Maugham notes: “In the first place, it is an essential doctrine constantly insisted upon in the original Buddhist texts [...] that there is nothing, either animal, vegetable, or material, which is *permanent*” (Rhys Davids 121).<sup>78</sup> ‘Nirvana’ literally means ‘blowing out’, ceasing the continuity of ‘dukkha’, ‘delusion’, and ‘lust’ to ‘go out’ the wheel of life, “escaping from the whirlpools of re-births” (Rhys Davids 164). The Four Noble Truth implies a syllogistic logic: Suffering comes out of ‘craving’; ‘craving’ is intrinsic to human existence; suffering will cease if craving ceases. In Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path refers to the path of eight ‘right understandings’ which ultimately leads to *nirvana*, salvation, or the liberation from the eternal cycle of suffering. The Eightfold Path includes: Right views, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness,

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<sup>78</sup> Italic original. Notes from the Maugham Library, the King’s School Archives.

and Right Concentration (Pine 119). Apart from the Buddhist claim that through ascetic practice of subduing the will, one puts an end to suffering, Schopenhauer recognises that the *will* is “essential nothingness” and advocates resignation, the negation of the will to life (*WWR* 1 424). This path to salvation is similar to the Christian mystics’ “quietism” that stresses on “attitudes of interiority, passivity, and resignation of the will” (Wimbush 23). The idea of resignation of the will is in line with the teachings of Sri Ramana Bhagavan Maharshi, the Indian saint that Maugham visited in 1938: “I AM THAT I AM” sums up the whole truth: the method is summarized in ‘BE STILL.’ And what does Stillness mean? It means ‘Destroy yourself” (Herman 14–15).

All the schools of Buddhism share a common belief that “the origin of sorrow is precisely identical with the origin of individuality” (Rhys Davids 124), which leads to suffering and ignorance. The practice of self-denial and renunciation enables a person to see through the illusory nature of appearance, “Maya, the veil of deception” (Schopenhauer *WWR* 1 28). Breaking through *māyā*, illusion, peace governs one’s mind, ushering in the ocean-like calmness of the spirit – tranquil reflections devoid of the turbulent desire. “Only knowledge remains; the will has vanished”; and nothing else is left: “no will, no representation, no world” (*WWR* 411). Sainly contemplation liberates a person from the bondage of will to the dark, terrifying truth of the world – complete nothingness. Schopenhauer concludes the book by suggesting that everyone acknowledge the truth of nothingness: “for everyone who is still filled with the will, what remains after it is completely abolished is certainly nothing. But conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and negated itself, this world of ours which is so very real with all its suns and galaxies is – nothing.” (*WWR* 1 439).

With this outlook, Schopenhauer’s philosophy is not entirely pessimistic. The only reason for which he might be thought of as pessimistic is that he denies the ultimate meaning of life. The inner core of reality, the will, has no goal and no conscious direction. It

surges blindly, stirring the appearance of human life, which is contingent and irrational. Human beings therefore suffer, desire, and continue to suffer. Philip Carey in *Of Human Bondage*, at last, realises this truth. For Schopenhauer, the will's appearance only lives in the *present*, not the past or the future; the past and the future are concepts and phantasm, and "the present is the only form of all life" (*WWR* 1 304–05). This, I believe, is the key to reading *Of Human Bondage*. It by no means encourages a pessimistic view but opens infinite possibilities of human life, which is meaningful to the subject at every present moment.

To this end, two Eastern parables play significant roles, specifically, two parables from Persia. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, after the Ghurid (Persian-Tajik) and Mamluk (Turkic) conquest of the Northern India and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, Persia flourished farther east, extending to Delhi and beyond, leading to the linguistic and cultural integration between Persia and India to a certain degree (Alam 133–34). There are two possible inspirations for Maugham's Persian parables: Henry James's short story 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1896) and Anatole France's *Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard* (1893) which contains a parable of the Persian Prince Zémire (Maenchen-Helfen et al. xxvi). There is no published record of Maugham's opinion of Henry James's story, but the second parable is mentioned in *The Summing Up* with reference to Anatole France's *La Vie Littéraire* (*SU* 248). The two parables appear at the critical moments of the narrative, illuminating Philip's philosophical inquiry of life's meaning.

Henry James poses a hermeneutic question in 'The Figure of the Carpet': the literary critic is unable to interpret the author's intention, through the metaphor that the fictional author Hugh Vereker's story is said to be something 'like a complex figure in a Persian carpet'. In *Of Human Bondage*, Cronshaw tells Philip that honour, duty, and goodness are nothing and that men only act according to their pleasure (will), shattering Philip's worldview. He cries "why are we brought into this world?" (*HB* 230). Cronshaw buys a Persian carpet from a Levantine at the café and tells Philip: "You were asking just now what

was the meaning of life. Go and look at those Persian carpets, and one of these days the answer will come to you" (*HB* 232). The riddle is not solved until years later, when Philip learns about Hayward's meaningless death, he walks alone to the British Museum, thinking of his friend, once capable of great things and full of enthusiasm for the future, has achieved nothing, at the futile end of his futile life. Philip asks himself desperately what the use of life is. He thinks of the poor poet Cronshaw, dead and forgotten. He thinks of his own life, his suffering. All the contemplation leads to his answer: "It seemed pure chance. The rain fell alike upon the just and upon the unjust, and for nothing was there a why and a wherefore" (*HB* 584). At this moment, Philip remembers Cronshaw's Persian carpet, and suddenly he understands it: "The answer was obvious. Life had no meaning" (*HB* 584). He then remembers the story of the Persian Prince Zémire:

Philip remembered the story of the Eastern King who, desiring to know the history of man, was brought by a sage five hundred volumes; busy with affairs of state, he bade him go and condense it; in twenty years the sage returned and his history now was in no more than fifty volumes, but the King, too old then to read so many ponderous tomes, bade him go and shorten it once more; twenty years passed again and the sage, old and gray, brought a single book in which was the knowledge the King had sought; but the king lay on his death-bed, and he had no time to read even that; and then the sage gave him the history of man in a single line; it was this: he was born, he suffered, and he died. There was no meaning in life, and man by living served no end. It was immaterial whether he was born or notborn, whether he lived or ceased to live. Life was insignificant and death without consequence. Philip exulted, as he had exulted in his boyhood when the weight of a belief in God was lifted from his shoulders: it seemed to him that

the last burden of responsibility was taken from him; and for the first time he was utterly free. (*HB* 584–85)

The parable evokes Schopenhauer's view on the futility of human life: "the individual receives life as a gift, emerges out of nothing, and then suffers the loss of this gift through death, returning back into nothing" (*WWR* 1 301); "for the pleasure of the one, the other must live, suffer, and die" (*WWR* 2 583). The Persian Prince did not bother himself to find out the answer of life's meaning, and it was too late for him to know the truth – 'he was born, he suffered, and he died'. The moment Philip Carey understands that human life is nothing but futile suffering, he becomes free from the emotional bondage that he has been suffered. This philosophical epiphany allows Philip's reason to liberate from will.

Philip understands that life is like a complex figure in a Persian carpet, woven by one's deeds, feelings, thoughts, everything uniquely meaningful to himself (*HB* 585). He has been desperately seeking happiness, for a liberation from emotional bondage, but at this point, Philip realises that happiness is just as futile as pain. Life has no purpose. Life is justification in itself: "Whatever happened to him now would be more motive to add to the complexity of the pattern, and when the end approached he would rejoice in its completion" (*HB* 586). Philip also realises his own power to make decisions: "Life was not so horrible if it was meaningless, and he faced it with a strange sense of power" (*HB* 599).

The narrative shifts to metaphorical descriptions after Philip has learned to accept life with resignation. A significant scene is his uncle's death. The 'Stephen Carey' manuscript describes from an omniscient perspective how Stephen's uncle exhales his last breath and how his aunt and cousin burst into tears, and later, the funeral details. In *Of Human Bondage*, the death scene is replaced with the protagonist's contained observation of an insect: "A bluebottle buzzed against the window-pane. Suddenly there was a loud rattle, it made Philip start, it was horribly frightening, a movement passed through the limbs and the old man was dead. The machine had run down. The bluebottle buzzed, buzzed noisily

against the window-pane" (*HB* 618). The bluebottle recalls of Virginia Woolf's 'the Death of a Moth' and the ancient Greek tradition of using the moth or butterfly as a metaphor of death. This third-person free indirect speech marks Maugham's progression from his earlier realist style. Through observing the bluebottle's futile struggle against the windowpane, Philip understands the futility of life and learns to accept death more peacefully.

The ending of the 'Stephen Carey' manuscript conveys two paragraphs of moral lessons, advising readers to "resign to the fact that most men had been in love with more than one woman in their lives and that all human beings are very, very weak" ("ATSC" 2311). Similarly, in the ending of the *Of Human Bondage* manuscript, Maugham originally instructed the readers "to accept happiness is to resign oneself to defeat" ("HB" 1658) but deleted the paragraph later. Philip's story concludes at an open ending, leaving the reader to find out the meaning themselves, like Cronshaw's Persian riddle: "it was no answer at all unless you found it out for yourself" (*HB* 285). The ideas of inherent emptiness of life and resignation would be further explored in Maugham's other two philosophical novels *The Narrow Corner* and *The Razor's Edge*, with direct allusions to India and Indian philosophy. I will discuss the two novels in the following sections.

### **Crossing the Buddhist Sea**

*The Narrow Corner* (1932), despite receiving sparse critical attention, has been assessed as Maugham's "most underrated novel" (McLaughlin 146) and one of his "finest pieces" (Brander 73). Its vivid descriptions of the surging sea and the main character's free indirect speech beautifully weave the Buddhist idea of impermanence into the seafaring storyline. Written between *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944), and with its manuscript heavily edited over twelve years, *The Narrow Corner* continues Maugham's philosophical exploration of human suffering and resignation.

This section locates *The Narrow Corner* in the following three orientations: First, the novel involves an Australian character and is set in the seas north of Australia (Torres Strait, the Arafura Sea, the Timor Sea, and the Banda Sea, etc.). The current study recovers Maugham's connection with Australia, which has been almost completely neglected in existing scholarship. Second, the novel is steeped in Buddhist concepts such karma, transmigration, and resignation. Buddhism plays a pivotal role in shaping the worldview of the main character, Dr Saunders, a cynical observer who watches detachedly the follies of the world. The novel also alludes to India, including the scholar character Frith's two shelves of books on Indian religious texts and his ongoing translation project of the Portuguese epic *The Lusíads*, which depicts a sea journey to India. Third, I will compare the published novel with its manuscript, 'The Fugitive', with examples of how the narrative moves away from a mystery story to Maugham's Buddhist navigation of human life.

Due to its underrated status, *The Narrow Corner* has yet to receive significant scholarly attention. Lawrence Normand's 2010 conference paper identifies the Vedantic and Buddhist allusions in the novel but falls into colonial assumptions by claiming that Maugham as a Western author fails to fully internalise Indian religious systems, presenting them as subjective, mystical, fragmented moments (5). In 2013, Normand coined a term 'Buddhist Modernism' in his edited book *Encountering Buddhism in Twentieth-Century British and American Literature*, discussing writers such as T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Virginia Woolf, Christopher Isherwood, and Samuel Beckett, while omitting Somerset Maugham. I will examine the depth of Maugham's engagement with Buddhism in *The Narrow Corner* through intertextual analysis and archival research, introducing 'The Fugitive' manuscript housed in the National Library of Australia and Maugham's intellectual connection with Australia for the first time to the public.

*The Narrow Corner* was planned for more than a decade before its publication. Two of the three main characters, Dr Saunders and Captain Nichols, appeared in Maugham's

previous works, *On a Chinese Screen* (1922) and *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), respectively. In the preface to *The Narrow Corner*, Maugham wrote he was conscious that the character Captain Nichols was not finished at the time he finished *The Moon and Sixpence*. When correcting errors in the typed proof, he was struck by a piece of conversation and thought it could be the idea for a novel, so he cut out the passage and developed it to *The Narrow Corner* twelve years later (NC vii–x). Dr Saunders is an unregistered doctor who left England for unknown reasons and settled down in Fuchou, China. In ‘The Stranger’ in *On a Chinese Screen*, Dr Saunders tells an indolent missionary that a ‘stranger’ named Christ has been looking for him, which upsets the missionary. The doctor is a wise, detached, and cynical man who observes the world with coolness and sophistication, viewing everything as dreamy and illusionary, an outlook that the author inherited from Schopenhauer and Buddhism. Dr Saunders’ philosophy of life resonates significantly with the author’s own to an extent that Cordell argues *The Narrow Corner* could be “considered with the autobiographical novels” (146). Ted Morgan also finds the Buddhist connotation behind the story, arguing that *The Narrow Corner* was “a philosophical novel disguised as a thriller” (357). Calder views it as a serious novel in preparation for *The Razor’s Edge*, where “the tenets of Indian philosophy are more skilfully integrated with the story than they are in *The Razor’s Edge*” (*Freedom* 229).

Maugham draws from his notebooks stemming from his travels in Asia in the early 1920s, using them as foundational context for *The Narrow Corner*. In February 1921, Maugham and Gerald Haxton sailed from San Francisco for Honolulu and from there to Australia, staying in Sydney for a month, and finally to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula (Hastings 257). In September 1922, Maugham and Haxton embarked on a nine-month Eastward journey, visiting South and East Asia: Burma, Siam, and Indochina (Morgan 264), as documented in *The Gentleman in the Parlour* (1930). Some other notes, including descriptions of Thursday Island, Singapore, the Portuguese ports on Banda Island and a

near-death experience on the stormy sea – all appearing in *The Narrow Corner* – were later collected in *The Writer's Notebook* (1949). These non-fiction works preserve Maugham's crucial reflection on the limitation of Christianity and his deepening understanding of Buddhism along his travels.

In his notes of T.W. Rhys Davids's *Buddhism*, dated to Aug 1922 in autograph, Maugham annotated the following quote on Karma:

The Buddhist doctrine of Karma is an attempt made five hundred years before the birth of Christ to formulate a similar but wider idea. Men are merely the present and temporary links in a long chain of cause and effect, a chain in which no link is independent of the rest, can get away from the rest, or can really, as men think they can, start off, and continue to be by itself without the rest. Each link is the result of all that have gone before, and is part and parcel of all that will follow. (Rhys Davids 127–28)

The Law of Karma designates that the history of a person does not begin with his birth, but manifests as the result of his endless past existences, or the wheel of rebirth. Maugham, having sought an answer to the question that troubled his early life, why God creates evil and allows the world to be full of misery, finds it in the Buddhist idea of Karma, which he believes to be “as plausible an explanation of the existence of evil in the world as has been devised by human wit” (*POV* 67). He believes that the Law of Karma “is the only explanation of the evil of this world that does not outrage the heart” (*GP* 176) and that “the doctrine of the transmigration of souls” is the only “one explanation that appealed equally to my sensibility and to my imagination” (*SU* 260). In *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, Chapter 25 describes a Siamese Buddhist monastery and a story about transmigration told by a monk named Kyuzaw, and Chapter 30 is devoted to an introduction of Gautama, the Buddha, and the “homely and yet austere” religion he founded (*GP* 172). Maugham introduces Gautama's life in this chapter: he renounced the world where he was the son of a king, led a simple and

austere life with a passion for metaphysical disquisition, and under a wild bodhi tree, he found enlightenment (*GP* 172). These materials showcase Maugham's deepening Buddhist understanding compared with his confusion with "the strange gods, dark and gesticulating" and the spiritual state they represented when visiting a Chinese temple in 1919 (*OCS* 142).

Despite the maritime setting and the use of materials from the author's travels in the East, *The Narrow Corner* is structurally and thematically *not* a seafaring adventure story. Here is a brief plot summary: Dr Saunders, after his surgical removal of patient Kim Ching's cataracts in Takana, in the Malay Archipelago, boards the schooner *Fenton* and joins Captain Nichols and his only passenger Fred Blake, a handsome and well-educated Australian who seems to be a fugitive. This beginning bears a difference from seafaring novels like *Moby Dick* because they set out *without* a purpose. Dr Saunders is just bored and does not want to go directly back to China; Captain Nichols and Fred are wandering aimlessly, seeking refuge far from Sydney. The story develops in their landing on Kanda, one of the twin islands Kanda-Meira, and befriend Erik Christeen, a Dane whose name suggests his character as "idealistic goodness" (Calder *Willie* 233), Frith, a Cambridge graduate and former schoolmaster, Frith's beautiful daughter Louise and his Swedish father-in-law Swan. The climax happens when Erik discovers that Louise, engaged to him, spent a night with his friend Fred, leading to Erik's suicide. The mystery is revealed in the grief-stricken Fred's confession to Dr Saunders about his murder of an influential politician in Sydney because the politician's wife was obsessed with him. After Fred and Dr Saunders discuss the meaning of life, the *Fenton* sails away. In the end, Dr Saunders meets Captain Nichols again in Singapore and tells him that Fred fell into the water and probably died.

The sea in *The Narrow Corner* is a metaphor for the human life full of suffering, an idea similar to the Buddhist concept *samsāra*. *Samsāra*, traditionally associated with the cyclical process of karma and rebirth, is often likened to an ocean, a mystery, an abyss, and a forest – a vast expanse of unfathomable depths where one is liable to get lost (Julius).

*Samsāra* arises from two inextricably mixed dimensions: desire, or seeking worldly satisfaction, and *avidyā* (ignorance), a lack of wisdom (Chakravarthi). Ignorant and unaware, human beings are trapped in the cycle of birth and death in a condition of bondage called ‘this shore’. The goal of Buddhism is to liberate one from the bondage of ‘this shore’, entangled in the wheel of rebirth, and obtain eternal freedom. This Buddhist focus on bondage and liberation corresponds to the major theme of freedom in Maugham’s life and works. The Buddha uses the great light of wisdom to shine through the dust of desire, helping people to cross the sea of *samsāra* and realise nirvana, to reach “the other shore” and end the suffering once and for all (Pine 33). The images of the sea and the shore are crucial in Buddhist classics; for example, the Sanskrit title of *The Heart Sutra*, *prajnaparamita*, literally meaning “the perfection of wisdom”, is often interpreted by Chinese translators and commentators as “what leads us to reach the other shore” (Pine 31). In this context, the vehicle (*yāna*) that travels across any kind of water to reach the other shore, whether a boat, ship, or oceangoing vessel, becomes a central motif in Buddhist discourse (Shaw 27). The two major schools of Buddhists are named after the imagery of vehicles, differentiated by their beliefs regarding the authenticity of the sutras. One school, known as the *Hinayana* or *Lesser Vehicle*, maintained that works composed long after 480 B.C., and not recited at the first Council immediately following the Buddha’s death, could not be authentic; in contrast, the other school, known as the *Mahayana* or *Great Vehicle*, asserted that even these later sutras originated from the Buddha’s own teachings (Conze 28).

Both schools’ Buddhist worldview resonates with Maugham’s personal pursuit of freedom. He travels, to liberate himself from past suffering; he reads and writes in order to find the truth of life, which he discovers in the East. By 1930, Maugham had abundant knowledge of Buddhism. In *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, Maugham writes: “Buddhism is a way of life rather than a religion. It is terribly austere. It is like an unknown sea when the day breaks as though it had ever broken before and the colours of the morning steal over

the earth as though for the first time and you, your bearings lost, with none to point the way, look with dismay upon the water's desert wastes" (*GP* 174). The 'unknown sea' reveals another metaphorical meaning of the sea in relation to human life: transitoriness, or impermanence, like the changing colours of the morning and the vast, flowing territory of water. He then quotes the Buddha: "'All is passing,' said the Blessed One, 'all is sorrow, all is unreal'; and he never ceased to insist on the transitoriness that embittered life" (*GP* 174). The Buddha views the world as a miserable place where everything is transitory. The epigraph of *The Narrow Corner*, a quote from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (iii 10), also reveals the transitoriness of life: "Short, therefore, is man's life, and narrow is the corner of the earth wherein he dwells". The new title and epigraph pointing to Stoicism add more philosophical depth to the novel, making a more direct reference to tenets of desire-reduction compared with the original title 'The Fugitive'. Facing such a desolate human condition, Maugham gives his answer: "If all things are transitory, let us find delight in their transitoriness" (*GP* 175). This transitory, impermanent attitude is expressed by Dr Saunders in *The Narrow Corner*: "Life is short, nature is hostile, and man is ridiculous; but oddly enough most misfortunes have their compensations, and with a certain human and a good deal of horse-sense one can make a fairly good job of what is after all a matter of very small consequence" (*NC* 192).

*The Narrow Corner* reveals the illusory nature of human life, and the *Fenton* is the vehicle that travels across the sea of suffering and transitoriness. The trio on the vehicle – Dr Saunders, Captain Nichols, and Fred Blake – represent three levels of wisdom. According to Red Pine, Buddhists distinguish three levels of *prajna*, or wisdom (30). Fred Blake represents the first level of wisdom: the mundane wisdom, "which views what is impermanent as permanent, what is impure as pure, and what has no self as having a self" (Pine 30). Fred is young and ignorant, believing that his friendship with Erik and his passionate love will ever last. This form of wisdom is erroneous but common to most people

in the mundane world because of their ignorance. Captain Nichols represents the second level of wisdom: the metaphysical wisdom, “which views what appears to be permanent as impermanent, what appears to be pure as impure, and what appears to have a self as having no self” (Pine 30). As Gore Vidal wrote in the *New York Review* in 1990, “the captain is a martyr to dyspepsia and a lady-like wife, whom he industriously runs away from and who industriously catches up on him again in some odd corner of the globe” (Vidal). The captain is always travelling to escape his wife and find new excitement to counteract the depression brought by his dyspepsia. This kind of wisdom, as Red Pine writes, “remains rooted in dialectics and does not result in enlightenment” (30). Dr Saunders represents the third level of wisdom, the transcendent wisdom, “which views all things, whether mundane or metaphysical, as neither permanent nor impermanent, as neither pure nor impure, as neither having a self nor not having a self, as inconceivable and inexpressible” (Pine 30). The first two levels of wisdom result in attachment of views, but the transcendent wisdom is free of views because it is based on a recognition that all things are empty of anything self-existent, and thus nothing can be characterised as permanent, pure, or having a self (Pine 31). Dr Saunders’s character features such detachment: “He wanted nothing. He envied no man. He had no regrets” (NC 144). Dr Saunders’s Buddhist way of life emphasises inner tranquillity removed from strong emotions, like Wordsworth’s view of poetry: “he said that the value of life lay not in its moments of excitement but in its placid intervals when, untroubled, the human spirit in tranquillity undisturbed by the recollection of emotion could survey it being with the same detachment as the Buddha contemplated his navel” (NC 144).

This Buddhist understanding makes the novel coherent, even though the narrative may seem incoherent within the framework of either mystery or adventure genres. The doctor’s aimless start of the journey, witnessing a series of human sufferings, and finally reaching the unresolved ending all reveal the illusionary nature of mundane things. The *Fenton’s* travel on the Eastern Sea symbolises a journey to liberation. Fred and the Captain

seek liberation – from being convicted and from a wife, respectively – but ultimately fail because of their attachment to impermanent things. Fred dies and the captain is found by his wife. Dr Saunders sighs at the very end of the book, “for whatever it was, if the richest dreams the imagination offered came true, in the end it remained nothing but illusion” (*NC* 293). The Kanda Island, another key setting of the book, is home to disillusioned characters. Frith, who read about the island in his childhood, envisioned it as a place “where the sea was scented with spices and there were great marble palaces”, and upon arrival, deluded himself that “because they’ve got marble floors and stucco columns he really thinks they are marble palaces” (*NC* 180, 82). Old Swan, Frith’s Swedish father-in-law, witnessed the death of his New-Zealander friend in New Guinea, “with the head cut off, and all a mass of blood from the wounds in his back” (*NC* 170). Erik, a romantic enthusiast for English literature, was fond of the late Mrs Catherine Frith, who died of angina. Erik commits suicide for the loss of his ideal: Mrs Catherine Frith’s beauty and her qualities passed to her daughter, “those Shakespeare heroines” and “the princesses in Hans Andersen’s fairy tales” (*NC* 284). This family experiences death in each generation: Catherine suffered from heart attack, and her two sons born before Louise both died; Old Swan’s children died one after the other (*NC* 215). This structure mimics the cycle of birth and represents the ‘four sufferings’ in Buddhism: Life, Aging, Sickness, and Death. Frith dedicates most of his time to reading Indian books and translating *The Lusiads*, hoping his daughter Louise will travel to India in the future (*NC* 285), showing a glimmer of liberation from the family’s cycle of suffering.

In the following, I will compare *The Narrow Corner* with its manuscript ‘The Fugitive’, arguing that Maugham did not originally intend to write a Buddhist story. His extensive revision in this manuscript shaped Dr Saunders into a more detached character than the original. The archive in the National Library of Australia also documents the interesting story behind the acquisition of this manuscript: during a visit to the U.S.A. in 1950, a Commonwealth librarian, Mr. White met Somerset Maugham at a Book and

Authors' luncheon in New York and suggested the author present a manuscript to the Commonwealth National Library (the former name of the National Library of Australia) as a companion to the manuscript he presented to the Library of Congress. The author promised to do so. Later, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies visited France, Maugham invited him to lunch at his villa and gave him the manuscript to be presented to the National Library upon his return to Canberra. This anecdote was recounted in a news release 'Presentation to the National Library' (21 February 1951) archived in the National Library together with the manuscript. The news article mentions Maugham's other link with Australia: his daughter Liza married Lord John Hope, a member of the House of Commons and a grandson of the first Governor-General of Australia, Lord Hopetoun.

Maugham's one-month stay in Sydney in 1921 led to contact with leading Australian writers and intellectuals. He also conducted correspondence with two well-known Australian artists, Norman Lindsay and Jack Flanagan, in the 1940s, now preserved in the State Library of New South Wales. The news article "Somerset Maugham in Sydney" published in *The Home* (1 September 1921), written by Bertram Stevens (1872–1922), an established Australian literary and art critic, contains Maugham's critique of Australian paintings in galleries and reproductions in *Art in Australia*, referring to them as "conventional" (Stevens 17). Stevens also reported Maugham's travel in Australia: from Borneo he came around the Australian coast to Adelaide, then to Sydney where he stayed for a month until he caught the boat for Thursday Island and Darwin, and from Darwin to Banda-Neira (Stevens 46), a pair of twin islands in the Pacific which turn out to be Kanda-Meira<sup>79</sup> in *The Narrow Corner*.

The manuscript 'The Fugitive' is bound in a hard black cover and consists of 348 + 3 pages written in blue ink and extensively altered in red ink. The manuscript seems to be written on loose pages with two holes on each page and bound later. The abundance of

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<sup>79</sup> 'Kanda' means the 'divisions' or 'chapters' in Vedas. I'm not sure if this is Maugham's intentional naming.

revisions is striking, surpassing those seen in Maugham's other works such as *Of Human Bondage* and *On a Chinese Screen*. Notably, certain chapters, particularly the opening ones, were significantly rewritten, resulting in substantial changes to the pagination. A pivotal alteration occurs after page 326, where three almost unchanged pages numbered 326a, 326b, and 326c were inserted. These pages contain a conversation of Dr Saunders telling Fred about his belief in resignation, in a tone similar to the Buddha's teaching:

"You've lost heart, hope, faith and awe. What in God's name have you got left?"

"Resignation."

The young man jumped to his feet.

"Resignation? That's the refuge of the beaten. Keep your resignation. I don't want it. I'm not willing to accept evil and ugliness and injustice. I'm not willing to stand by while the good are punished and the wicked go scot-free. If life means that virtue is trampled on and honesty is mocked and beauty is fouled, then to hell with life."

"My dear boy, you must take life as you find it." ("TF" 326b; NC 273-74)

The passage is important on its own terms. Its later insertion sets up the rest of the narrative and the novel's Buddhist themes, raising the novel to a philosophical level. Fred does not seem to understand Dr Saunders's teaching on resignation but still believes in the linearity of life where good deeds should end up being rewarded.

The early chapters of the novel were significantly rewritten. Dr Saunders in the original draft appears more confident and positive, and he has something to look forward to.

The last paragraph of Chapter Three was firstly written as:

~~Dr Saunders was bored but he was not discontented. He was able to amuse himself with little things + the delight of pure beauty. It was an end in itself. He was lord of space and time. There was no problem that he could not solve~~

~~if he chose, everything was clear, everything was exquisitely simple; but it seemed foolish to resolve the difficulties of existence where there was such an exquisite pleasure in knowing that you could do so when you wanted to. Dr Saunders gave a little chuckle + finished his bottle of beer. He had that to look forward to. What did the length of the day matter when the night must bring him peace + power + that incomparable bliss. ("TF" 8-9)~~

The doctor becomes more composed in the published version:

Time hung somewhat heavily on the doctor's hands, but he was not discontented. He was able to amuse himself with little things, and the mangy dog, the thin chickens, the pot-bellied child all diverted him. He drank his bottle of beer slowly. (*NC* 7)

Descriptions of Dr Saunders's emotions are minimised in the published novel. In the first draft of Chapter Four, seeing Fred's youthful charm, Dr Saunders was "astonished" and "felt his heart go out to this boy" ("TF" 15). In the author's autograph correction, such feelings were transplanted to the reader through the second-person narrative: "When he smiled you saw that he had exquisite teeth. They were very white, small and of a perfect shape; they were so unexpected a grace in that sombre face, their beauty was so dazzling, that you were taken aback. His sulky smile had great sweetness." (*NC* 12–13). This second-person perspective is used most famously in the story 'Rain' (see Chapter Two), and in this novel, introducing Louise's courtesy: "You might have fancied she had stopped in a momentary embarrassment at the sight of strangers; but she did not move on, she stayed still, watching with a singular calm the men who advanced towards her; and then you received an impression, not exactly of self assurance, but of tranquil unconcern" (*NC* 155–56). Although the novel is largely narrated in Dr Saunders's free indirect speech, these close moments of observing an endearing character are transferred to a second-person perspective.

Dr Saunders's past is unknown, but it must contain significant suffering to an extent that he once wanted to end his life. During a life-threatening storm, he thought: "Once indeed he had decided to make an end of himself, but painlessly, and it had needed an odd mixture of courage, cynicism and cold reason to make him go on with a life that seemed to offer nothing desirable." (NC 99). In the manuscript, the author mentioned "~~he had died so many times that he had exhausted his emotion~~" ("TF" 122–23), probably alluding to Dr Saunders's recurring suicidal thoughts, but he removed the sentence afterward. The storm is a catastrophic force that brings suffering to all beings, and the one who lucidly survives will find the Buddhist path (Shaw 27). *The Narrow Corner* contrasts Fred Blake's mundane wisdom and Dr Saunders's transcendental wisdom. Fred enjoys the excitement of looking at the wave: "Grand, isn't it? Exhilarating having a bit of a blow like this" (NC 94), unaware of the danger, and unaware of the Buddhist truth of universal suffering. In the original draft, Dr Saunders is annoyed: "Damned fool," the doctor thought, but he did not speak." ("TF" 113). In the revised version, he just shrugs his shoulder without answering Fred.

A pivotal change in the manuscript appears in the Japanese diver scene. At Port Darwin, an Australian pearler asks Dr Saunders to help examine his sick crew. Maugham changed the men who suffered from dysentery – two Torres Strait Islanders – into one Japanese pearl diver ("TF" 61–62; NC 52). This revision is crucial to the whole storyline because, as both Normand and Calder notice, the death of the Japanese diver leads Dr Saunders to think about the value of life from a Buddhist perspective (*Freedom* 230; Normand 3). Dr Saunders's internal monologue is written in lengthy free indirect speech close to a stream-of-consciousness technique. Maugham contrasts Dr Saunders's Buddhist compassion with the Australian's careless indifference: "Damn these Japs, they've got no constitution" ("TF" 62), reflecting the 'East as Other' attitude (see Chapter One). Dr Saunders's thoughts move from his memories of the bustling life in London to the fishermen

and coolies on the Min River in Fuchou and finally to the dying Japanese diver, his possible Buddhist belief, transmigration and impermanence:

London was at the other end of the world. [...] The doctor smiled. He did not regret the past; he regretted nothing. Then his wandering thoughts hovered over the bridge at Fu-chou, the bridge over the Min River, from which you saw the fishermen in the barges below fishing with cormorants; rickshaws crossed the bridge, and coolies bearing heavy loads, and the innumerable Chinese walked to and fro. [...] The doctor attached small value to human life. Who, that had lived so long amid those teeming Chinese where it was held so cheap, could have much feeling about it? He was a Japanese, the diver, and probably a Buddhist. Transmigration? Look at the sea: wave follows wave, it is not the same wave, yet it causes another and transmits its form and movement. So the beings travelling through the world are not the same to-day and tomorrow, nor in one life the same as in another; and yet it is the urge and the form of the previous lives that determine the character of those that follow. [...] In that lovely night, his thoughts flowing without purpose, like birds, sea-gulls, wheeling over the sea, rising and falling as the wind took them, he could not but keep an open mind. (*NC* 55–57)

Normand is critical of this paragraph, claiming it muddles the Buddhist notion of “transmigration” and the Christian notion of “the spirit”, and where the last sentence of this philosophising is “the bathos of a non-conclusion” (3). This paragraph’s philosophical musing is discernible and profound particularly when considering the Buddhist connotation of the sea. Captain Nichols’s schooner constantly traversing the sea, Dr Saunders’s inner thought constantly concerns life and death. The sentence ‘Look at the sea, wave follows wave, it is not the same wave, yet it causes another and transmits its form and movement’

invokes a sense of impermanence. This sentence has been carefully crafted compared with the original: ~~“Wave followed wave on the sea, nor is it the same wave, + yet one wave caused another wave + transmits its form + movement. So the beings travelling through the world are not the same today + tomorrow”~~ (“TF” 66–67). The final sentence of the excerpt flows back from Buddhist thought to the sea, turning to non-human creatures such as birds and seagulls which share the same level of rebirth in the cycle of karma.

A later passage directly touches on karma, in Dr Saunders’s free indirect speech:

For that Jap, lying there, dying there, painlessly, it was not the end, but the turning over a page; he knew, as certainly as he knew that the sun in a few hours would rise, that he was but slipping from one life to another. Karma, the deeds of this as of all the other lives he had passed, would be somehow continued; and perhaps, in his exhaustion, the only emotion that remained to him was curiosity, anxious it might be or amused, to know in what condition he would be reborn. Dr. Saunders dozed off. (*NC* 82)

In the Buddhist cosmology, the universe has no beginning; instead, it is the result of karma, the law of the cause and effect of actions (Lopez 21). Dr Saunders understands that the death of the Japanese sailor does not mean the end, but re-entering the cycle of karma, like turning a page or a new day’s sunrise. The free indirect speech allows readers to enter Dr Saunders’s imagination that the Japanese sailor does not feel emotionally troubled by death but remains curious of his next life.

Maugham’s numerous alterations, almost a rewriting of ‘The Fugitive’ may result from his deepening understanding of Buddhism during the twelve years between the initial idea of writing this novel (1919) and its publication (1932), years that witnessed his most extensive travels in the East, especially in Buddhist countries at that time such as Burma, Siam, and Indochina. These experiences likely enriched his knowledge of Buddhism and

influenced the thematic development and characterisation of *The Narrow Corner*, a philosophical novel that bridges *Of Human Bondage* and *The Razor's Edge*.

It is worth noting that *The Narrow Corner* touches on Vedanta as well, which will be introduced in more detail in the next section: Frith and Dr Saunders has a conversation about the Vedantic idea of 'atman', "the ultimate Self" (Koller 57). Frith says the beginning of the universe is "Atman, the supreme soul [spirit], from which [whom] emanated maya, the illusion of the phenomenal world" ("TF" 195). Advaita Vedanta<sup>80</sup> emphasises the identity between Atman and Brahman, the ultimate reality, the "impersonal Absolute" (Hamilton 28–29), "the source of all other beings, the intellectual principle, the perceiving mind, life and body" (Radhakrishnan "Introduction" 59). *The Upanishads* affirms that knowing the oneness between Atman and Brahman will help one liberate from the cycle of rebirth and achieve immortality (Koller 57). The early *Upanishads* are full of statements drawing on such oneness: the expression "ātman is Brahman" identifies the essential self with cosmos, ultimately not two things but one (Hamilton 30). Advaita Vedanta will become the philosophical foundation of *The Razor's Edge* after Maugham's visit of an Indian saint.

### **In Search of Jñāna**

Before *The Razor's Edge* (1944), Maugham had experimented with similar characters and themes in his early novel *The Hero* (1901), an unproduced play 'The Road Uphill' (1924), and a short story 'The Alien Corn' (1931). These stories, centring on a misfit young man seeking liberation from family and society, provide prototypes for his masterpiece *The Razor's Edge*. In this novel, the American protagonist, Larry Darrell, turns away from the prevailing capitalist culture of Chicago and finds inner peace during his five-year stay in India. Critics have noted this novel's affinities with Californian non-attachment literature,

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<sup>80</sup> 'Advaita' means 'non-dualistic', 'Vedanta' means 'after Veda'.

or the Vedanta of the West, which emerged in the late thirties and early forties, represented by Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, and Gerald Heard (Calder *Freedom* 238). Despite his close friendship with each of them, Maugham does not identify himself as a Vedantist.

*The Razor's Edge* continues Maugham's lifelong exploration of spiritual freedom and literary strategies such as first-person autobiographical narration. In addition to the novel, this section surveys Maugham's early works, personal accounts, and archival materials concerning India.

Maugham's Advaita Vedanta focuses on one Indian philosopher, Shankara<sup>81</sup> (Śaṁkara/Sankara), the foundational figure of this school whose doctrine is "from a purely philosophical point of view, and apart from all theological considerations" (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 445). In the Volume 2 of S. Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*, all Maugham's autograph annotations point to Shankara's philosophy – all together over seventy notes in the two-hundred-page chapter 'The Advaita Vedanta of Śaṁkara'. Several central terms of the Advaita Vedantic philosophy are borrowed from Buddhism, such as avidyā. "Māyā," "jñāna or wisdom, as the direct means to moksa [moksha] or freedom" (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 452–53).<sup>82</sup> In January 1941, at Christopher Isherwood's house in the Hollywood hills, Maugham, Isherwood, and Gerald Heard had long conversations about the *Upanishads*, Vedanta, and Shankara's philosophy (Hastings 517). In his diary entry dated January 14, 1941, Christopher Isherwood wrote: "Willie also came up to see Gerald [...] All he wanted now was to go back to India and write a last serious book about Shankara, spending his last days in a monastery" (*Diaries* 142–43). Christopher Isherwood was "much moved on hearing this" (*Diaries* 143). Maugham's Shankara project never reached fruition due to the Second

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<sup>81</sup> Max Muller holds that he was born in A.D. 788 and died in A.D. 820. Some other scholars propose that he flourish in the sixth, seventh or ninth century A.D. See S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*. vol. 2, George Allen & Unwin, 1929. p.447. I also note the alternative spellings of the philosopher's name Śaṁkara/Sankara.

<sup>82</sup> Jñāna is different from the Buddhist term 'prajñā', mentioned in the previous section. 'Jñāna' focuses more on 'knowledge' while 'prajñā' on 'wisdom'. See Red Pine, *The Heart Sutra*. Counterpoint LLC, 2005. pp. 29–30.

World War. *The Razor's Edge*, although not covering as much philosophical material as Maugham intended, becomes one of his best-known novels with a Vedantic path of liberation.

Fifteen letters (1938–1959) in the archives of the Huntington Library and Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre document the sustained friendship between Maugham and Christopher Isherwood. One of Maugham's letters (8 July 1943) confirms that the title of *The Razor's Edge* derives from the third Valli<sup>83</sup> of *Katha-Upanishad* ("Letters to Isherwood"). *Katha-Upanishad*, one of the primary Upanishads, unfolds a philosophical dialogue between a boy named Nakiketas and Yama, the God of Death. They discuss profound topics such as the nature of the Self (Atman), the Ultimate Reality (Brahman), and the path to moksha (liberation). Maugham quoted from Max Muller's translation of 3.14 of *Katha-Upanishad* as the epigraph of the book: "The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path (to the Self) is hard" (Muller 14) but changed Muller's explanation 'the path (to the Self) to 'the path to Salvation' to better fit his story. Unsure of his understanding, Maugham asked Christopher Isherwood for suggestions:

One thing more: has your Swami Sankara's commentary to the Katha-Upanishad? If so, can you or he tell me what he has to say about the phrase at the end of the third Valli: The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over; thus the wise say the path (to the self) is hard. I want to use either The Sharp Edge of a Razor or the Razor's Edge as the title of my new novel; but as it stands the phrase would be incomprehensible to the reader. (To the self) is, I take it, Max Muller's addition to make it clear. Would it be justifiable to change it to the path to salvation? That is what would precisely suit me. ("Letters to Isherwood")

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<sup>83</sup> The *Katha-Upanishad* consists of two Adhyayas (chapters), each divided into three Vallis (sections).

I am not certain if Isherwood sent Maugham the Shankara commentary, but I find the commentary in another book, partially quoted as below:

With what can that fine intellect be compared? This is being said: *Dhḍrd*, the edge; *ksurasva*, of a razor; *nisita*, being sharpened; becomes, *duratvava*, such as can be passed over with great difficulty, impassable. As that razor is difficult to walk on with the feet, similarly, *kavayah*, the intelligent people: *vadanti*, describe; *pathah* (should rather be *panthanam*), the path—consisting in the knowledge of Reality; (as) *durgam*, impassable, i.e. hard to attain. The idea is that since the object to the known is very subtle, they speak of the path of knowledge leading to it as impassable. (Śankarācārya 165–66)

This commentary centres on knowledge as a path of liberation. Similar to Buddhism, the goal of Vedānta is “freedom from rebirth” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 474). However, unlike Buddhism which views everything as impermanent and illusory, Advaita Vedānta affirms a permanent, unchanging Self (Atman, identical to Brahman): the self “never dies, is never born—unborn, eternal, everlasting, this ancient one can never be destroyed with the destruction of the body” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 33). In Maugham’s copy of *Indian Philosophy*, he annotated that Shankara “emphasised jñāna, or knowledge of the supreme spirit, as the chief end of man’s endeavour” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 473). Shankara’s Brahman “transcends the opposition of permanence and change, whole and part, relative and absolute, finite and infinite, which are all based on the oppositions of experience” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 536). Because māyā is one inherent energy of Īśvara (God, the personal aspect of Brahman), most people “can never understand how the ultimate reality is related to the world of plurality, since the two are heterogeneous, and every attempt at explanation is bound to fail” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 573). Hence, the empirical world is perceived as appearances of oppositions and plurality, a status of avidyā in which one fails to understand the ultimate reality. Shankara’s knowledge (jñāna) is more intuitive than logical. He claims that logical

knowledge constitutes the finiteness of the human mind (avidyā), causing the deceiving and deceived “sense of individuality of the empirical self” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 596). Only with jñāna, one can break saṃsāra and attain freedom – Shankara’s commentary above means that obtaining this intuitional knowledge is as difficult as passing over the razor’s edge. Larry Darrell, the protagonist of *The Razor’s Edge*, is traumatised by witnessing his friend’s death during his pilot service in the First World War. He seeks knowledge, at first, logical, and later, transcendental, to understand the truth of life and suffering. Based on Shankara’s philosophy, ‘the path to the Self’ and ‘the path to Salvation’ are the same thing, because they both speak of intuitive knowledge which can dispel the veil of māyā and help one realise Brahman is Atman. With this possible explanation, Maugham replied to Isherwood in a letter dated on 27 July 1943: “Thank you for your letter + the valuable information. It settles my difficulty very satisfactorily” (“Letters to Isherwood”).

Larry Darrell finds his jñāna in India. His frequent references to Vedantic philosophy lead readers and scholars, for example, Jeffrey Meyers (*SMAL* 327), to speculate that the character is modelled on Christopher Isherwood. Maugham firmly denied such speculations. In a typed letter responding to one of his readers, now preserved by a book collector (Figure 24), Maugham writes, “Larry Darrell is a creature of my invention and in no way suggested by Mr. Isherwood” (Kirinde).

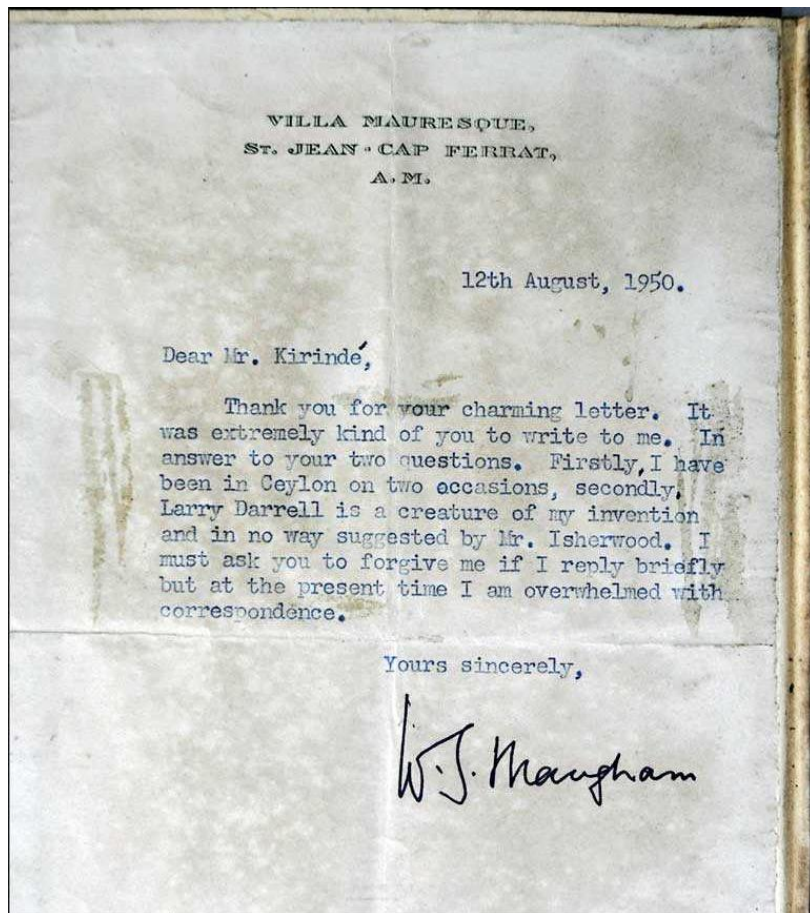


Figure 24. 'Maugham's Letter: A prized possession,' personal collection

*The Razor's Edge* continues Maugham's spiritual pursuit against materialist expectations, a theme explored earlier in *Of Human Bondage* and *The Moon and Sixpence*. Larry Darrell rejects a comfortable life in Chicago and moves away to Europe and India in search of transcendental knowledge. Maugham describes Larry's eyes "deep set in the orbits" – they are "so dark that the iris made one colour with the pupil, and this gave them a peculiar intensity" (*RE* 19–20). The depth and intensity of Larry's eyes are synecdochic of the character's deep inquiry into things' essence behind material appearance. Larry's pilot service during the War also lends an air to his transcendental character: "when you're up in a plane by yourself, high, high, and only infinity surrounds you. You're intoxicated by the boundless space" (*RE* 78). The 'infinity' and 'boundless space' are beyond logical reasoning

and suggestive of Brahman. Driving a plane in ākāśa, “one, infinite, imponderable, inert, all-pervasive” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 591) sky or space is symbolic of Larry’s abandoning the egoistic sense of the self and merging into the infinite Brahman.

In the novel, Maugham has one direct citation of the American transcendental poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose poetry is deeply influenced by Indian philosophy, as discussed in ‘East as Method’ in Chapter One. When Larry visits the Elephanta Caves, seeing the enormous sculptures of three gods in Hinduism: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer, the three manifestations of the Ultimate Reality, Larry feels “the Infinite” and remembers Emerson’s poem ‘Brahma’ (*RE* 282–83), written after Emerson’s reading of the *Katha-Upanishad* in 1856. Emerson confuses and mixes two different concepts: the first is Brahma, one of the Indian gods, the Creator, and the second is Brahman, the “Absolute which mankind seeks to be united with” (McLean 116). The subject of Emerson’s poem is actually Brahman (the Absolute), not Brahma (the Creator). Maugham quotes the third stanza of Emerson’s poem, an unmistakable expression of Brahman:

*They reckon ill who leave me out;*

*When me they fly, I am the wings;*

*I am the doubter and the doubt,*

*I am the hymn the Brahmin sings.*

(Emerson ‘Brahma’, cited in *RE* 283, italic original)

Emerson’s speaker ‘I’, Brahman, is omnipresent. The first two lines present Brahman as inseparable from individual beings (they); the third and fourth lines strengthen the idea of oneness: Brahman is both the subject and object of individual beings’ doubt or worship.

As in Buddhism, Vedantic ‘light’ is a metaphor for knowledge, which can help one pierce ‘the veil of maya’ and recognise the identity of Brahman and Atman. The Self/Brahman is “the only light of life” (Gough 38; Radhakrishnan “Introduction” 62). In *The Razor’s Edge*, the physical descriptions of Larry are references to Vedantic ‘light’: he has

“a smile that lit his face as with an inner light” (*RE* 32); “his face lit up” (*RE* 58). Larry’s reading of Western philosophy in the early chapters reflects his pursuit for knowledge in contrast to the highly material, capitalistic, and industrial American society, foreshadowing his later turn to Indian philosophy and realisation of the ultimate reality.

The Chicago setting of *The Razor’s Edge* resonates with American Naturalism represented by Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, where the author describes the dazzling cityscape and booming industries, from its stockyards to its trading floor (Olson 8). *The Razor’s Edge* portrays the American middle-upper class through Larry’s fiancée Isabel who just wants to “have fun” (*RE* 96) and her uncle Elliott Templeton’s snobbish social connection. The novel also ruthlessly describes Gray Maturin’s financial ruin during the Great Depression. *The Razor’s Edge* is imbued with the vein of American spirit, presented in the ideology of progress, Manifest Destiny, and the American Dream: “This is a young country, and it’s a man’s duty to take part in its activities” (*RE* 49); “The resources of America are inexhaustible” (*RE* 126); “A man ought to work. That’s what he’s here for. That’s how he contributes to the welfare of the community” (*RE* 77); “You see, he feels it’s a man’s business to work and if he can’t work he may just as well be dead” (*RE* 149). Criticising such a progressive ideology, Maugham follows Larry’s spiritual journey as a contrast to materialist pursuit. He quotes Kant’s word ‘disinterested’ in the narrator’s description of Larry, who has a “disinterested desire for knowledge” (*RE* 94). As in Chapter Three, Kant’s disinterestedness in aesthetics means that the viewer’s capacity to observe the beautiful is free of desire, that is, pleasure arises from the observation of beauty rather than seeking out beauty as a way full of desire. Larry’s ‘disinterested desire’ for knowledge does not involve any practical interest. Pleasure arises simply from his search of knowledge – jñāna – empirically and philosophically. He does not seem to have any material desire: he cares little about money and does not even notice “what he eats” (*RE* 40).

*The Razor's Edge* concludes the recurring themes of suffering, nationalism, personal fulfilment and liberation that Maugham has explored throughout his lifetime. Its earliest prototype can be traced back to *The Hero*, published in 1901, which the author never allowed to be republished. *The Hero* opens with Captain James Parsons's glorious return from the Anglo-Boer War to his hometown in Kent with a Victorian Cross. The deep irony is that the Victorian Cross was awarded to James for his attempt to save his friend Reggie Larcher, which actually caused Reggie's death. The traumatised James feels unfit in the national heroism prevailing in his hometown and refuses to marry his fiancée, Mary Clibborn. This opening is similar to that in *The Razor's Edge* where Larry Darrell returns to Chicago from the First World War, after witnessing his friend's death in attempt to help him, and cancels his engagement with Isabel. *The Hero* concludes with James's suicide before his wedding as a stubborn refusal against his family's and society's expectations. This powerful ending offers a strong critique of British nationalism in the context of the Anglo-Boer War.

Critics comment that the plot of *The Hero* is "absurd," and its ending "grotesque" (McLaughlin 137), while its philosophical concern is one of "Maugham's strongest expressions of determinism" (Calder 59). Considering the time of its publication, the novel subverts the empire-builder narrative as Maugham's earliest critique of English nationalism, much earlier than the stories discussed in Chapter Two. Lawrence Brander notices that Maugham's views are both "intelligent and courageous" in 1901, "the year of *Kim*, the greatest expression in the English novel of our imperial infallibility" (Brander 14). In *The Hero*, James frequently expresses anti-heroic sentiments, but his family and Mary cling to British nationalism. For example, James speaks of his sympathy with the Boers: "The Boers are the smaller, weaker nation, and they have been beaten; it is only natural that sympathy should be with them," but only finds "his listeners looked at him with surprise, even with consternation" (*TH* 28). More importantly, this juvenile novel touches on

Maugham's earliest philosophical exploration of his lifelong topic, 'freedom'. One of his classical metaphors, a caged bird, appears in *The Hero*: "James was like a foolish bird – a bird born in a cage, without power to attain its freedom" (*TH* 149). The cage is Maugham's literary expression of philosophical determinism, while the bird, in its futile effort to break free, reflects Maugham's early representation of the futility of human suffering.

Raymond Mander's *Theatrical Companion to Maugham* (1955) recovers Maugham's unpublished, unproduced play, 'The Road Uphill', providing a summary of characters and the plot of each scene. Maugham acknowledged that the play "never came to anything" and the theme was used afterward to write *The Razor's Edge* (Mander 198). The play opens in Chicago in 1919, centring on Joe Sheridan who survived the War unscathed with a distinguished record as a flyer, and who was engaged to a girl called Ruth Latimer. Mrs Sheridan is worried about her son, who "has done nothing" and "has refused several good office jobs" (Mander 196). Joe travels to Paris to study painting, but two years later he gives up painting because an expert tells him he will never be more than a gifted amateur. Ruth advises Joe to settle down to "a man's work," but Joe refuses, insisting he must seek "the unknown lands of the soul" (Mander 197). Disappointed, Ruth returns Joe's engagement ring and chooses to marry their mutual friend, Howard Green, who turns out losing everything in a financial disaster. The play ends in a dramatic scene where Howard cuts himself in the spinning engine of a flying machine while Joe bends over the fainting Ruth. As Mander finds, the three main characters – Joe, Ruth, and Howard – can be easily recognised as prototypes of Larry Darrell, Isabel Bradley and Gray Maturin in *The Razor's Edge*, and Joe's uncle Mr Madden is developed into Elliott Templeton (Mander 199).

The dramatic ending leaves Joe's 'search for his self' unresolved, while *The Razor's Edge* fulfills Larry Darrell's journey profoundly. One episode in this play, the "situation of a young man who, after sacrificing two years of his life to the study of an art, is informed that he will never be more than a gifted amateur" is retold more powerfully in Maugham's short

story 'The Alien Corn' (1931), where the central character is a Jewish musician and the verdict drives him to suicide (Mander 199). The phrase 'alien corn' is a Biblical reference (Ruth. 2) that appeared in John Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), suggesting "a faraway or unfamiliar landscape" (Delahunty). The "sad," "sick" image of Ruth, standing "in tears amid the alien corn" (Keats), is eternalised by Keats in his declining health and grief over his brother's death (Everest 30–32). In *The Razor's Edge*, Isabel alludes to the Biblical Ruth: "I suppose it's more in woman's nature to sacrifice herself than in a man's." she chuckled, 'Ruth and the alien corn and all that sort of thing' (98). In 'The Road Uphill', the character's name Ruth (the counterpart of Isabel) bears the same Biblical allusion, portraying a female character unable to choose her own fate.

The protagonist in 'The Alien Corn', George Bland, a Jewish young man who grew up in a British Baronet family, shoots himself through the heart when his family is deciding his marriage. This ending bears a striking resemblance with that in *The Hero*: "James immediately went to the cupboard and took out a cartridge. He slipped it in, rested the butt on the ground, pointed the barrel to his heart, and – fired!" (*TH* 154). Maugham added an epilogue to this scene in an unnamed commentator's voice: "He shot himself accidentally while cleaning a gun—that is to say, everyone thinks it was an accident. But I am certain it was nothing of the kind" (*TH* 155). Similarly, in 'The Alien Corn', the impersonal narrator appears in the last two sentences in a scathing tone: "Apparently the gun had been loaded and George while playing about with it had accidentally shot himself. One reads of such accidents in the paper often" (*AC CSS* 2 147–48). This ending speaks to the theme of respectability: it would be shameful to acknowledge George committed suicide, so it is covered up as an accident. The tone here is one of the narrator enlarging on and speaking through the imagined response of family and wider public, criticising George's family as the root of the tragedy symptomatic of the aristocratic class in general.

Similar to his empathy for the weaker nation in the Boer War in *The Hero*, Maugham empathises with the Jewish character in ‘The Alien Corn’. George Bland’s physical descriptions – “the perfect type of the young Englishman,” “tall and slim,” with “curly hair,” “full and sensual” lips, “beautiful teeth,” and “smooth skin” (AC CSS 2 115) – recalls Neil MacAdam, the likely homosexual character in the eponymous story ‘Neil MacAdam’ (see Chapter Two). In his 2011 article, Philip Holden points out ‘The Alien Corn’ negotiates with two hidden forms of identity: Judaism and homosexuality, and one crucial link between the sexual orientation and race in this story is the status of art (977). George’s parents expect their son to become the third Baronet and enter the Parliament: “After all, we’re absolute English; no one could be more English than George, in appearance and manner and everything” (AC CSS 2 117). Ironically, the ‘absolute English’ Blands are in fact Jewish: the family patriarch abandoned his Jewish beliefs and came to England as Sir Alfred Bland, first Baronet. Maugham’s arrangement for the Jewish George to travel to Germany to learn piano as an escape of his family is striking, especially in the context of the 1930s when the National Socialists rose to power in Germany. It is problematic though, considering the absence of political context in this short story. George’s decision may be autobiographical because the sixteen-year-old Maugham chose Germany as the first foreign country to escape his uncle’s vicarage.

The first-person narrator in ‘The Alien Corn’ expresses admiration for George’s Jewish great uncle Ferdy Rabenstein, who is proud of his Jewishness: “he was not a great man, but within the limits he set himself he made of his life a work of art” (AC CSS 2 111). Maugham also describes the Blands’ antisemitic attitudes (ironic, given their Jewish identity): they regard Ferdy as “a horrid old man” and cut off family connection with him (AC CSS 2 115). After visiting Munich, George changes his attitude toward his great-uncle. He used to hate hearing Ferdy telling his Jewish stories, but in this travel, he understands

that it is “a safety valve” (AC CSS 2 136). He identifies more with the Jewish people in Munich:

“I? I’m not English. I haven’t a drop of English blood in me. I’m a Jew and you know it, and a German Jew into the bargain. I don’t want to be English. I want to be Jew. My friends are Jews. You don’t know how much more easy I feel with them. I can be myself.” (AC CSS 2 136–37).

Embracing his Jewish identity, George feels he can be himself, in a similar vein to Philip Carey’s self-recognition: “He was his own master at last” (HB 95). Both characters find themselves in Germany, just as the sixteen-year-old Maugham who finally finds freedom in Heidelberg and indulges himself in literature, philosophy, and drama in a world outside England.

Despite the many identifiable parallels between George Bland in ‘The Alien Corn’ and Larry Darrell in *The Razor’s Edge*, this relation has not received serious scholarly examination. First, both characters have no interest in money despite their materialist families. For George, “Money means nothing to me” (AC CSS 2 138); and for Larry, “Money just doesn’t happen to interest me” (RE 50). Second, the search for spiritual meaning seems ‘idle’ and unproductive in their families’ eyes. George “had been completely idle at Oxford”: he is not keen on politics or sports but “spent most of his time strumming the piano” (AC CSS 2 119). In *The Razor’s Edge*, when the narrator asks Larry what he wants to do if not to take a job, Larry gives “his radiant, fascinating smile. ‘Loaf,’ he said” (RE 35). ‘Loaf’ is a loaded word in American literature, used strategically in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, particularly in the early sections of ‘Song of Myself’:

I loafe and invite my soul,

I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. (Whitman)

Here the lowly, folksy word *loafe* (an older spelling of loaf) seems out of place in the same sentence with *soul*, a word weighted with implications of the highest stratum of being

(Koch). The strange mix of words is Whitman's poetic license which reflects not only the diversity of American culture, but also the conducive effect of 'loafing' on one's soul, that is, freedom. Whitman, also influenced by Vedantic philosophy (see Chapter One), and takes poetic inspiration from Indian mysticism as a philosopher of oneness and a poet of rapport (Engels 57). From 'a spear of summer grass' (Figure 25), the poet sees the divine and the cosmos itself as a representation of the 'self' (Atman), which is one with the ultimate reality (Brahman).

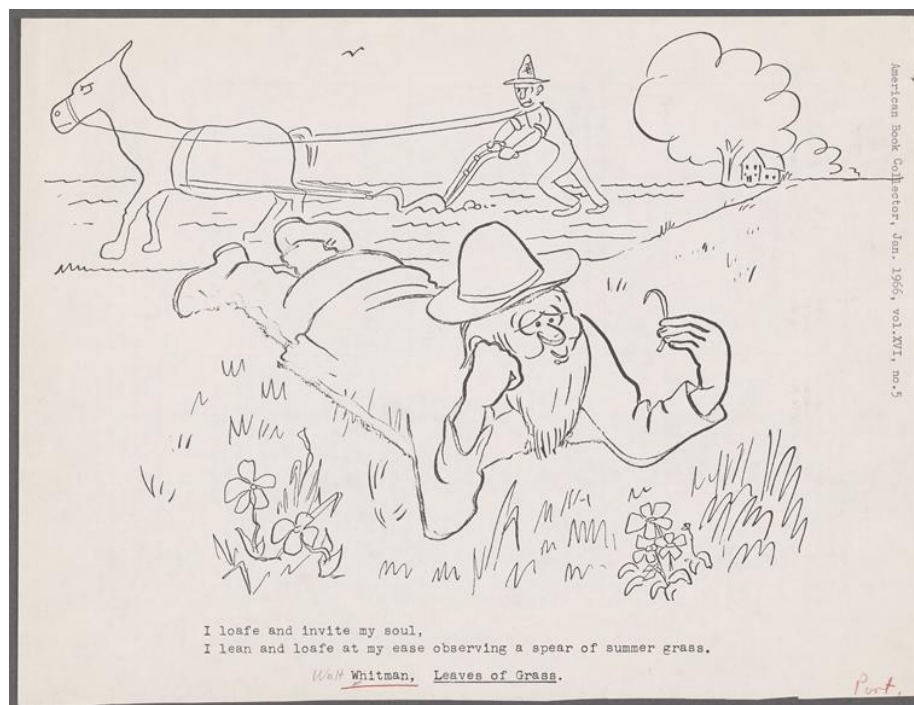


Figure 25. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art)

Following this cosmology, *The Razor's Edge* unmistakably alludes to Whitman in its absorption of Vedantic philosophy. Larry's loafing is by no means being idle but an embodied spiritual search for his 'Self'. Then, the third parallel between the two stories is that both protagonists emphasise spiritual progress over bodily suffering. Studying piano in Munich, George "had grown very fat. His hair was extremely long, it curled all over his head in picturesque confusion; and he had certainly not shaved for three days" (AC CSS 2

132). Larry reads in Greek, Latin, and French, seeing his “vast lands of the spirit stretching out,” and works in a coal mine in France and on a farm in Germany as “a rest from books” (*RE* 72, 103). The two characters derive disinterested pleasure from their pursuit of art and knowledge in a similar way to the artists in *Of Human Bondage* and *The Moon and Sixpence*.

Exploring the possibility of personal freedom against social expectations, *Of Human Bondage* finds the answer in Schopenhauer, *The Moon and Sixpence* in Tahiti, *The Painted Veil* in Daoism, and *The Razor’s Edge* in Vedanta. In India, Larry finally finds his path to salvation. Larry’s fictional experiences are based on Maugham’s travel to India in 1938, recounted in *A Writer’s Notebook* (1949) and ‘The Saint’<sup>84</sup> collected in *Points of View* (1958). Maugham and Gerald Haxton arrived in Bombay in January 1938 and spent three months in India (Morgan 408–09). They stayed ten days in Bombay, then went south to Madura, and north to Madras, where they were told a great Indian sage Swami Ramana Maharshi lived in a place called Tiruvannamalai. Arriving at the place, Maugham fainted. Maharshi’s half-hour meditation made Maugham feel better. Maugham’s description of Swami Maharshi in ‘The Saint’ is taken almost verbatim from the section in *A Writer’s Notebook*, written immediately on his return to Madras. The essay reads:

The Maharshi was of average height for an Indian, of a dark honey colour, with close-cropped white hair and a close-cropped white beard. He was plump rather than stout. Though he wore nothing but an exiguous loin-cloth (what his biographer somewhat inelegantly calls a cod-piece) he looked neat, very clean and almost dapper. He had a slight limp, and he walked slowly, leaning on a stick. His mouth was somewhat large, with thickish lips, and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot. He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity. His mien was cheerful, smiling, polite; he did not

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<sup>84</sup> The Saint’ opens with an incorrect statement that the author visited India in 1936. The year 1938 should be correct, according to Maugham’s personal notebooks and biographies.

give me the impression of a scholar, but rather of a sweet-natured old peasant. (*POV* 58)

The opening of ‘the Saint’ clearly states that Maugham’s visit to India is not for sightseeing, but for intellectual purposes: “I had not come to shoot a tiger, or to sell anything, nor especially to see the Taj Mahal, the Caves of Ajanta or the temple of Madura, but to meet scholars, writers and artists, religious teachers and devotees” (*POV* 56). Before his travel, Maugham had read extensively on Indian philosophy: “The most important of these are Sir Charles Eliot’s *Hinduism and Buddhism*; Radhakrishnan’s *History of Indian Philosophy* and his translation of the *Upanishads*; Krisnaswami Iyer’s *Vedanta, or the Science of Reality*; *Brahma-Knowledge* by Professor Barnett; and Sankara’s *Vivekachudamani*” (*POV* 61). Although only Radhakrishnan’s *Indian Philosophy* is preserved in the Maugham library, ‘The Saint’ reflects Maugham’s deep understanding of Indian philosophy in his succinct introduction of key concepts to Western readers. For example, Maugham explains ‘Samadhi’ as “a trancelike state of profound absorption in the Infinite Reality, which is Brahman” (*POV* 62). He distinguishes ‘Samadhi’ from meditation, for its “complete unconsciousness of external objects” (*POV* 62). In 1956, Christopher Isherwood’s guru, Swami Vivekananda, reviewed and published the essay’s philosophical part in his magazine, most likely *Vedanta and the West*, according to Isherwood’s letter to Maugham dated 26 July 1956: “Here are the notes on your article. Swami thought I could express his criticisms more clearly. I hope I have. I had never read much about the Maharshi before, and the article fascinated me. It is such a beautifully balanced account of your personal experience in relation to the biographical facts” (Isherwood “Letters to Maugham”). Maugham replied on 2 August 1956,<sup>85</sup> with gratitude and a conscientious question concerning Swami Vivekananda’s comments on Samadhi:

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<sup>85</sup> Maugham’s letter doesn’t include the year. The Huntington Library’s record (1959) seems wrong, because I find this letter fits coherently between Isherwood’s two letters.

Will you thank the Swami for the care he took in reading my essay + for his useful criticisms. I am very grateful to him. I was particularly interested in what he said about Samadhi + will make the necessary enumerations. But what surprised me was his statement that the devout were only able to enter into Samadhi at the end of their careers. The Maharshi was able to do this as a very early age (17) + he + his disciples were convinced that they could look into Samadhi (as opposed) to meditation at will. Were they mistaken or were they frauds? No one who knew the Maharshi could for a moment think that he was not serious. When I said that the Upanishads were sometimes contradictory & erroneous, my authority was Racha Krishna. Could there be a little one. But to satisfy the Swami I can moderate the statement. Will you tell him that if he still thinks it worthwhile the print this section of my essay in his magazine, I will have a corrected copy of it sent to him. (“Letters to Isherwood”)

Isherwood replied with clarification on 11 August 1956:

Thank you for your letter of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Swami certainly did not mean, and I did not mean to suggest that the Maharshi’s Samadhi was in any way suspect. It is of course possible to have Samadhi repeatedly during one’s life, beginning at an early age. (Vivekananda, for example, was 18 when he first had it.)

Swami only meant to point out that such early and frequent Samadhi is very unusual – only achieved by the greatest devotees – such as the Maharshi was. Others have to wait until the end of their lives, in many cases. But even this is not an absolute rule. Ramakrishna, for example, had a power of transmitting Samadhi to others, and might the Maharshi had it too?

Yes please, Swami would very much like to print the philosophical part of your essay in his magazine. (“Letters to Maugham”)

These letters have shown Maugham's serious attitude of learning from Swami Vivekananda and his friend Isherwood. 'The Saint' turns out a well-written philosophical essay combined with personal account in forty pages, evident of Maugham's extensive research and careful proofreading with his reviewers' comments.

In *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham uses an autobiographical first-person narrator and an unreliable frame narrative to report Larry's experiences in India. Part Six of the novel is dedicated to describing the narrator Mr Maugham's conversation with Larry, where the narrator demonstrates his unreliability by claiming he knows little about Vedanta:

I must interrupt myself to make it plain that I am not attempting here to give anything in the nature of a description of the philosophical system known as Vedanta. I have not the knowledge to do so, but even if I had this would not be the proper place for it. Our conversation was a long one and Larry told me a great deal more than I have felt it possible to set down in what after all purports to be a novel. My concern is with Larry. (*RE* 292–93)

This authorial interruption tells readers that the philosophical system of Vedanta is at the centre of the novel, but the narrator does not intend to expound it. What the narrator (and readers) cares for is the story. In the beginning of Part Six, the narrator even warns the reader that "he can very well skip this chapter without losing the thread" of the story since it is nothing more than his conversation with Larry (*RE* 261). The narrator also adds that "however, that except for this conversation I should perhaps not have thought it worth while to write this book" (*RE* 261). This meta-narrative moment affirms the unreliability of the narrator, a strategy similar to the moment in *The Moon and Sixpence* when the narrator reflects on his previous unreliable judgement of Strickland.

Part Six, nevertheless, touches key ideas of Vedantic philosophy through the narrator's account of Larry's speech, which the narrator claims himself unable to fully understand. Larry says the goal of Vedanta is "liberation from the bondage of rebirth" (*RE*

290); Atman “is not part of the Absolute, for the Absolute, being infinite, can have no parts, but the Absolute itself” (*RE* 290); for liberation, one must “cast off the seven veils of ignorance” and lose his individuality to “become one with the Absolute” (*RE* 290–91). The narrator, not following Larry, asks what the Absolute is. Larry answers:

“Reality. You can’t say what it is; you can only say what it isn’t. It’s inexpressible. The Indians call it Brahman. It’s nowhere and everywhere. All things imply and depend upon it. It’s not a person, it’s not a thing, it’s not a cause. It has no qualities. It transcends permanence and change; whole and part, finite and infinite. It is eternal because its completeness and perfection are unrelated to time. It is truth and freedom.” (*RE* 291)

Larry’s explanation of Brahman, the ultimate reality, resembles the Dao in Chinese Daoism (see my Chapter Three), from which all things originate, to which all things return, and with which all things abide. This omnipresent Absolute cannot be pictured by a finite mind bonded in binary thinking or entangled in practical interest. In Shankara’s philosophy of Vedanta, “[t]he desire to know Brahman springs only in the person whose mind is pure, who is free from desire, and who, free from deeds done in this birth or in previous ones, becomes disgusted with the external ephemeral medley of ends and means” (Radhakrishnan *IP* 2 615–16). Larry’s ‘disinterested’ character is the foundation for his desire to ‘know’ Brahman and eventually attain jñāna and Vedantic realisation. Larry tells the narrator Maugham that through knowledge, one can reach salvation:

Advaita doesn’t ask you to take anything on trust; it asks only that you should have a passionate craving to know Reality; it states that you can experience God as surely as you can experience joy or pain. [...] I found something wonderfully satisfying in the notion that you can attain Reality by knowledge. [...] salvation may be won by the way of love and the way of works, but they never denied that the noblest way, though the hardest, is the

way of knowledge, for its instrument is the most precious faculty of man, his reason. (*RE* 292)

When Larry arrives in India as a sailor, he vaguely figures that he can find here what he has been looking for and decides not to return to Europe. After more than two years' stay in Madura, he hears about the saint Shri Ganesha and sets off to visit him in fictional Travancore. Another two years later, Larry experiences Samadhi at a sunrise, feeling himself merged into the Absolute and possessed by 'a knowledge more than human':

I have no descriptive talent, I don't know the words to paint a picture; I can't tell you, so as to make you see it, how grand the sight was that was displayed before me as the day broke in its splendour. Those mountains with their deep jungle, the mist still entangled in the treetops, and the bottomless lake far below me. The sun caught the lake through a cleft in the heights and it shone like burnished steel. I was ravished with the beauty of the world. I'd never known such exaltation and such a transcendent joy. I had a strange sensation, a tingling that arose in my feet and travelled up to my head, and I felt as though I were suddenly released from my body and as pure spirit partook of a loveliness I had never conceived. I had a sense that a knowledge more than human possessed me, so that everything that had been confused was clear and everything that had perplexed me was explained. I was so happy that it was pain and I struggled to release myself from it, for I felt that if it lasted a moment longer I should die; and yet it was such rapture that I was ready to die rather than forgo it. How can I tell you what I felt? No words can tell the ecstasy of my bliss. When I came to myself I was exhausted and trembling. I fell asleep. (*RE* 298–99).

Larry himself explains in the novel that "Samadhi" is a status where "the duality of subject and object vanishes and you become Knowledge Absolute" (*RE* 295). The sunrise here, like

that in *The Painted Veil*, represents the Kantian Beauty where one's spirit is liberated from practical interest and purely engaged in aesthetic pleasure; meanwhile the experience of attaining the Absolute aligns with the Sublime (see my Chapter Three). This moment of aesthetic judgement triggers Larry's intuitive knowledge, with which he feels the infinity of Brahman and himself a part of it. The egoist boundary that confines one's individuality vanishes. With this knowledge, Larry becomes the Absolute.

Larry is not satisfied with the Vedantic knowledge of the ultimate reality. He then questions why the infinite Absolute should create the finite world. Larry quotes Shankara:

Maya is only a speculation devised by those ardent thinkers to explain how the Infinite could produce the Finite. Samkara, the wisest of them all, decided that it was an insoluble mystery. You see, the difficulty is to explain why Brahman, which is Being, Bliss, and Intelligence, which is unalterable, which ever is and forever maintains itself in rest, which lacks nothing and needs nothing and so knows neither change nor strife, which is perfect, should create the world. (*RE* 300)

Larry, then, feels more positive about the present life than the idea of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. He recognises that other people and objects are also a part of the Absolute. It is not the Absolute that brings happiness, but the person's experience of the Absolute. Larry finds an impulse of living this life to its utmost, and if possible, next life:

If in those moments of ecstasy I had indeed been one with the Absolute, then, if what they said was true, nothing could touch me and when I had worked out the karma of my present life I should return no more. The thought filled me with dismay. I wanted to live again and again. I was willing to accept every sort of life, no matter what its pain and sorrow; I felt that only life after life, life after life could satisfy my eagerness, my vigour, and my curiosity. (*RE* 302)

Larry decides to return to America and become a taxi driver, “with calmness, forbearance, compassion, selflessness, and continence” (*RE* 304), reading and writing in the libraries in New York. This decision means Larry’s search for knowledge does not end with his realisation of Brahman but continues in his lifetime. At the end of the book, the narrator writes “all the persons with whom I have been concerned got what they wanted: Elliott social eminence; Isabel an assured position backed by a substantial fortune in an active and cultured community [...]; and Larry happiness” (*RE* 341). This means that other characters like Elliott and Isabel still live in their American Dream, but Larry lives outside it. He already finds his way of life and becomes happy with his lifelong search of knowledge.

### **Conclusion: The Indian Way**

In India, religion, philosophy, and the way of life are one with each other. Sue Hamilton writes in the opening of *Indian Philosophy*: “what Westerners call religion and philosophy are combined in India in people’s attempts to understand the meaning and structure of life – in the broadest sense” (1). Maugham annotates Radhakrishnan’s chapter on Shankara’s philosophy: “The Advaita is both a philosophy and a religion” (*IP* 2 624) and “the worship of God is not a deliberate alliance with falsehood, since God is the form in which alone the Absolute can be pictured by the finite mind” (*IP* 2 649). Seeking the way of life, the Indian people devise ‘karma’ and ‘transmigration’ to explain suffering and personify the Absolute as their religious gods. In fictional Larry Darrell’s words, the three ancient gods in Hinduism, Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva, are three “manifestations of the Ultimate Reality” (*RE* 282). Succinctly, in ‘The Saint’, Maugham points out that “The religion of the Hindus is not only a religion, but also a philosophy; and not only a religion and a philosophy, but also a way of life” (*POV* 61).

*Of Human Bondage* and *The Narrow Corner* answer Maugham’s question of human suffering with Schopenhauer’s and the Buddhist ideas of recognising the emptiness of life

and resignation to impermanence. *The Razor's Edge* finds the path of knowledge that leads to Vedantic salvation. This last novel, however, does not limit itself to Vedanta. It opens up a broader vision that understanding the Absolute enables a person to be infinite, which means the confine of one's individuality vanishes and his spirit enlarges to the cosmos as infinite as the ultimate reality. This kind of Absolute Knowledge (jñāna) transcends the binary thinking of permanence/impermanence, transitory/eternal, being/non-being.

This is what Maugham finally finds in India, an answer to his lifelong question of freedom. India is not the destination of his transnational quest, because he does not choose a Vedantist life like his friend Isherwood. Instead, taking the Indian idea of jñāna as his way of life, Maugham returns to Villa Mauresque and continues reading and writing, like his hero Larry Darrell. For Maugham, not everyone needs to be a hermit or a Vedantic devotee; only through self-renunciation, or through destroying the ego, can one achieve freedom. Just like in *The Razor's Edge*, Shri Ganesha teaches Larry: "it is not essential to salvation to retire from the world, but only to renounce the self" (*RE* 296). This lesson is the same as the one Maugham learned from Swami Maharshi: "He has destroyed the ego, so that only the Self remains, he will by the grace of Brahman achieve Realisation" (*POV* 92).

Knowing that his Atman is Brahman, Maugham understands the infinity of the human mind. This knowledge is of a much higher order than the dialectical knowledge that views things in terms of their opposites. Maugham does not need another philosophical journey to the East. After completing *The Razor's Edge*, he knows that he is Brahman. He finds happiness.

## Conclusion

Beginning with the question ‘What does the East mean for Maugham?’, this study develops into a modernist inquiry into history, philosophy, and transnational aesthetics. It approaches Maugham’s modernism through three key avenues: firstly, by delineating the interconnectedness between East and West and drawing three patterns from this complex intercultural history (East as Other, East as Reference, and East as Method); secondly, by recovering Maugham’s departure from English literary and social conventions as the starting point of his modernism; and thirdly, by viewing major locations in Asia and Oceania as crucial modernist sites. These regions provided Maugham with alternative responses to global modernity and intellectual resources for artistic innovation, altogether constituting his modernism.

This study reclaims Maugham’s imperialist critique from postcolonial (mis)readings of the 1990s onward, situates his Eastern fiction alongside that of his modernist contemporaries, and restores his philosophical inquiries that underpin his engagement with China and India. It reconsiders time and space in alignment with new modernist studies, expanding Maugham’s modernism to include Eastern localities and their respective histories and modernisation movements. Stories set in British Malaya, Borneo, Tahiti, and other locations in Southeast Asia, Australian Seas, and the Pacific in the 1920s-30s are examined to reveal Maugham’s debunking of imperialist logic and, to deploy Jean-Luc Nancy’s term, the ‘inoperative’ nature of colonisers’ communities. Maugham’s interactions with two Chinese intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, particularly, reflect his nuanced understanding of Chinese art and his empathy for a transnational Confucian philosopher marginalised by the radical Westernised intellectuals in modern China, where Confucian values were being replaced by Western ideals of progress. These

examples showcase Maugham's treatment of the East as his modernist method – to criticise British nationalism and to seek alternative philosophical frameworks for the fulfilment of his fictional world and characters.

Aesthetic principles from Chinese traditional art and literature – such as the suggestive quality of landscape painting and flower-and-bird painting – inform Maugham's understanding of Daoism and enrich the philosophical connotation of *The Painted Veil*. The novel suggests that the Daoist 'Way' between Presence and Absence offers the potential to fulfill the heroine's empty heart shaped by the materialist values instilled in her by English society. In a temporal dimension, this study traces Maugham's self-reflexive philosophical journey, beginning with Schopenhauer in *Of Human Bondage* and deepening through his later engagement with Indian schools of Buddhism (fifth century B.C.) and Shankara's Advaita Vedanta (eighth century A.D.), which sustain *The Narrow Corner* and *The Razor's Edge*. These three philosophical novels revolve around profound existential themes – such as the meaning of life, the futility of suffering, the cycle of death and rebirth, and spiritual liberation – drawing on Indian thought to address questions of evil and suffering and to overcome the explanatory limits of Christianity. Maugham's transnational and transcultural efforts engage directly with the central philosophical concerns of modernist literature.

The East is by no means a static backdrop for Maugham. Its recovery as a vital source of his aesthetics shows it to be dynamic, transformative, and central to his transnational quest for freedom, providing an alternative answer to his profound inquiries into human existence. Each of the five novels examined in this thesis centres on the problem of freedom and turn to the East for a possible solution: *Of Human Bondage* resolves in the Persian allegory, *The Moon and Sixpence* in Tahiti, *The Painted Veil* in Daoism, *The Narrow Corner* in Buddhism, and *The Razor's Edge* in Vedantic knowledge. These narratives mirror Maugham's own intellectual trajectory: from the exhaustion of Western knowledge and

disillusionment with materialism to a search for alternative, spiritual senses of being outside the mode of Western thinking.

Maugham's extensive reading of Eastern philosophy and his intellectual exchanges with Chinese scholars and the Indian swami enabled him to think beyond Western paradigms and forge deep philosophical connections with the East. His works transcend what Zong-qi Cai terms an "intracultural perspective" (239–40), reaching towards a kind of "cross-cultural" or even "transcultural" poetics (241–55). The Eastern philosophies he engages with – Daoism, Buddhism, and Vedanta – all challenge binary thinking: the Daoist aesthetic lies between presence and absence; Buddhist (transcendental) *prajñā* sees mundane things as neither permanent nor impermanent; and Vedantic *jñāna* dissolves the confines of individuality to merge one's spirit with the ultimate reality.

To reiterate, the threefold methodology established in Chapter One concludes with my vision of 'East as Modernist Method'. The East emerges not as peripheral, but as generative of and integral to modernism. Through this new modernist lens, Maugham's engagement with the East becomes his method for challenging Western literary conventions and historical assumptions. This contribution is far more significant than previously acknowledged. My reassessment of Maugham's modernism invites renewed dialogue in both Maugham studies and broader modernist scholarship.

Maugham's marginalisation in the literary canon may stem, in part, from Eurocentric critical frameworks. From a conventional Western perspective, his fiction may appear as anti-modernist. But stepping outside these frames of references reveals the profound philosophical dimensions of his narratives. Much like his frequently used irony – where Western characters suffer by virtue of their own cultural assumptions – conventional Western readings may lead to underestimation and even misinterpretation of Maugham's work. From an early stage in his life, Maugham suffered from and began tentatively to reject a purely European mode of thinking. His meticulous engagement with Eastern

history and philosophy ultimately informed his conscientious exploration of these global locations, along with their intellectual traditions and artworks. By turning to the East as his method, Maugham's fiction demonstrates the potential to dismantle entrenched Western binaries and explore human existence on a philosophical level. This study, grounded in solid historical and archival research, aims to furnish sufficient evidence and critical elaboration to support a re-evaluation of Maugham's literary significance.

Maugham's philosophical inquiry concludes in *The Razor's Edge*, but his engagement with Indian thought continues. Our reading of Maugham, too, continues. What comes next? Larry Darrell becomes a taxi driver, and having found his jñāna, what happens afterwards no longer matters. Maugham, too, having grasped the essence of Indian philosophy, liberates himself from his own trauma. How can we, readers a century later, judge him? Someone will understand his work; others never will.

Can we, like Maugham's characters, step outside our cultural traditions and adopt unfamiliar perspectives to observe the world? This is the question Maugham poses to his readers – and perhaps, to modernism itself.

## Glossary<sup>86</sup>

Advaita	A non-dualist school of the Vedanta tradition of Indian philosophy, in contrast with the school of Dvaita (dualism).
Arhat	A person who achieves Nirvana.
Akasa/Ākāśa	Sky, space.
Atman/Ātman	Self, soul.
Avidya/Avidyā	Ignorance.
Brahma	[Religion] the Creator in Hinduism (500 B.C.– 500 A.D.), one of Trimurti (three gods in Indian mythology: the other two are Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer).
Brahman	[Philosophy] the supreme Self, the Ultimate Reality.
Brahmin	The knower of Brahman.
Buddha	The awakened one.
Dharma	Form, norm.
Dukkha	Suffering, pain.
Gautama	The name of Buddha.
Guru	[Sanskrit] mentor, guide, expert, or master.
Indochina	[Colonial] a colonial federation under French rule, from 1887 to 1954, comprising of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.
Isvara/Īśvara	God, the personal aspect of Brahman.
Jnana/Jñāna	[Vedanta] Knowledge.
Junk	A sea-going vessel originating in China with characteristic high stern, flat base and square sails.
Karma	The law of the cause and effect of actions.
Malay	Any inhabitant of the Malaysian territories who meets the Constitutional definition of speaking the Malay language, professing Islam and following Malay customs.
Malaya	In general, refers to the Malay peninsula up to the declaration of Independence in 1957.
Malaysia	The Federation of Malaysia, formed in 1963.

<sup>86</sup> I use an online tool Sanskrit Keyboard Online [https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/sanskrit\\_latin.htm](https://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/sanskrit_latin.htm) to type IAST (International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration) romanisation. Accessed 5 May 2025.

May Fourth Movement	An intellectual revolution and sociopolitical reform movement that occurred in China in 1917-1921, culminated in a mass demonstration incident on May 4, 1919, in Beijing.
Maya/Māyā	Illusion.
Moksha	Freedom, liberation.
Myanmar	Burma.
National Southwestern Associated University	The wartime educational centre of the Republic of China (ROC), existing from 1938 to 1946 in Kunming. It was formed during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), by incorporation of National Peking University, National Tsinghua University, and National Nankai University.
Nirvana	Blowing out; Enlightenment.
Prajna/Prajñā	[Buddhism] Wisdom.
Resident	[Colonial] Title for a British colonial officer appointed to advise and oversee the administration of Malay states.
Samadhi	A translike state of profound absorption in Brahman.
Samsara/Saṃsāra	[Buddhism] the cycle of death and rebirth.
Sharawadgi	A term coined by Sir William Temple (1685) with Chinese etymology, meaning “space tastefully enlivened by disorder”.
Swami	A Hindu male religious teacher.
Taipan	[Colonial, Cantonese] a powerful expatriate businessman in mainland China or Hong Kong.
Thai/Siamese	The word Thai is the preferred name for the people of Thailand whose country was known as Siam before 1939.
The 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution)	A revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty and ended China’s over two thousand years of imperial rule.
The Republic of China (ROC)	A sovereign state governing mainland China from 1912 to 1949, transitioning from the fall of the Qing Dynasty to the end of the Chinese Civil War, after which the government retreated to Taiwan following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.
Tuan	[Malay] a term of respect for males and formerly for females (Sir, or Lady).

Upanishad	[Plural: the Upanishads] a series of late Vedic and post-Vedic Sanskrit texts (800-200 B.C.)
Veda	[Plural: the Vedas] a collection of poems or hymns composed in archaic Sanskrit (1500-1200 B.C.).
Vedanta/Vedānta	The 'conclusion' ( <i>anta</i> ) of the Vedas, one of the six systems of Indian philosophy.
Yana/Yāna	Vehicle.
Vidya	Knowledge.
Yuan Ming Yuan	"Garden of Perfect Splendour", an imperial garden complex in Beijing, which was looted and destroyed by French and British troops in October 1860.

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