



## The Enlightenment of Foucault’s Theory on the Relationship Between the East and the West

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### Abstract

In the world today, there still exists the relationship of the mainstream and the marginal, the dominating and the dominated between the East and the West. And Foucault’s theory of Discourse offers us a powerful theoretical weapon to break the mentality of the binary opposition between the East and the West, for it not only exposes the deeper mechanism of the western mainstream discourse, but also proposes the strategy to subvert it, that is, to establish a kind of counter-discourse through education/knowledge, and in this way, to deconstruct the western dominant discourse and establish a dialogic and constructive relationship between the East and the West. So this article will apply Foucault’s theory of discourse to illustrate the relationship between the East and the West, and then give a comprehensive analysis of the function of Foucault’s theory in enlightening us to establish a positive East-West relation.

**Key words:** Foucault; Discourse of power; The East-West relation; Counter-discourse enlightenment

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### INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault is one of the most influential philosophers in France and also in the whole western world in the contemporary society. Although Foucault has

been dead for many years, his theories on philosophy and history still have great influence not only in the field of philosophy, but also in almost every field of humanistic science. For its great influence, Foucault’s theory can be described as unique in the twentieth century. He has inherited the Nietzsche’s genealogy methods, and uses its distinctive perspective, in purpose to excavate in which words were buried, to make a deconstruction on the two special places—a lunatic asylum and prison. Based on this, he forms his own theory on the operation mode of society which is quite different from those of others. In this article, I’ll mainly analyse his theory of discourse and its enlightenment on the relationship between the East and the West.

### 1. THE BASIC CONTENTS OF FOUCAULT’S THEORY OF DISCOURSE

When we are talking about power relationship, we use Foucault’s terminology and seek support from the theory he worked on for the way that power functions in modern society. In his works, like *Madness and Civilization* (1861), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punishment* (1975), he explores the ways power and knowledge are connected in the production of subjectivity and identity in term of discourse, i.e., the institutional rules that make possible at certain time to a certain people particular significations, or knowledge, or truth. So in the following part, I’ll first have an introduction of the basic contents of his theory of discourse of power.

In Foucault’s view, discourse is generally used to designate the forms of representation, codes, conventions and habits of language that produce specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings. Just as Hall said, “What interested [Foucault] were the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods.”

(Hall, 1997, p.44) So from above, we can see that in the framework of Foucault's theory, discourse is not a neutral term but a carrier of knowledge and ideology of a certain class at certain period of time. In some sense, discourse is power, for it offers people the right to express themselves. Michel Foucault's early writings (*Madness and Civilization; The Order of Discourse; The Archaeology of Knowledge*) were especially influential in this. Foucault's works gave the terms "discursive practices" and "discursive formation" to the analysis of particular institutions and their ways of establishing orders of truth, or what is accepted as "reality" in a given society. According to Foucault, an established "discursive formation" is the relationship between some certain kinds of "serious" discourses and other discourses. It is in fact defined by the contradictory discourses it contains and this tolerance Foucault understands as a sign of stability created by the social systems.

Thus characterized, a given "discursive formation" will give definition to a particular historical moment or episteme. Its major concern is what the appearance of some discourse means in some certain conditions. "Discursive formations" do nevertheless display a hierarchical arrangement and are understood as reinforcing certain already established identities or subjectivities. (Gary, 2005, p.32)

These dominant discourses are understood as in turn reinforced by existing systems of law, education and the media. The implication of Foucault's theory is that members of a society are implicated in discourse and in the discursive regimes or systems of power and regulation. There is no place to stand outside such systems. However Foucault's theory emphasizes the potential within discursive practices to fracture, chip away, and subvert the dominant forces that exert the most control over a discourse, for what Foucault refers to as "practice" is not the implementation of those general accepted theories which haven't been tested by practice, on the contrary, they are just the objects that Foucault tries to criticize, for discourses are multivalent and intertwined, and at any given time an individual may be positioned differently depending on which discourses he is in. Practice is just a stopover from one theory to the next, so in fact there is no dominant discourse and "truth" is only a production of power relations. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth; that is, "the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" (Hall & Gieben, 1992, p.295).

## 2. THE FUNCTION OF FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF DISCOURSE IN REVEALING THE POWER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST

In his early works, Foucault begins to analyze the relationship between social system (culture, ideas,

language, politics, ect.) and discursive practice. What Foucault refers as discursive practice is different from speech acts in everyday life. The discursive practice only refers to those "serious" speech acts. The "serious" speech acts are the speeches of the authoritative subjects that can be accepted by the common people unconsciously. So these dominant discourses often appear as truth. In Foucault's view, there exists complex relationship between discourse and power. In some sense, discourse is power. It is a power of prosecution and exclusion, for it can be functioned as a constraint of people's mind to prevent them from thinking outside the dominant discourse. So naturally discourse becomes the subject that power pursues. From above, we can see that Foucault's theory of discourse is very useful for the analysis of the power relationship between the West and the East. As Said assumed in his famous postcolonial critical theory Orientalism:

Without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post—Enlightenment period. (Said, 1994, p.299)

So by the application of Foucault's theory of discourse, we can not only see clearly how the West dominates, restructures and has authority over the Orient through its hegemonic discourse in the form of its mass media, but also explore the possibility of constructing a positive relationship between the East and the West.

As we know, mass media is a very effective tool of the West to spread its discourse. In this way the West forces its ideas and standards into the mind of people in the East, thus reinforces its dominant position. The order of discourse decides what kind of speech and acts is reasonable and legitimate. If the practice of discourse is antagonistic, then it will either be refused, or at least will be marginalized. In the western dominant discourse, the Orient has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, landscapes and remarkable experiences. So, what do the newest forms of power relationships look like in the hegemonic "West/East" cultural context? According to Foucault, the world and the consciousness are made up by language. Voicelessness and silence can show that the individual is absent or forced by another power to be in the blind spot. In the western hegemonic discourse, the Orient, mainly referring to Asian Americans, is in the state of "aphonia". They have lost the power to depict themselves, so they can only be depicted by others. In the western mass media, Asian Americans are described as various kinds of stereotypes. An early and vivid manifestation of these stereotypes is Madame Butterfly, a submissive Oriental girl who falls in love with a white cruel man unconditionally, but is abandoned and commits suicide in the end. This image has traditionally been viewed as a Western discourse—Western way of

considering, understanding and representing the Orient: The powerful West is associated with virile masculinity while the subordinate East is associated with passive femininity. Another typical stereotype in the Western discourse is the Yellow Evil, represented by Fu Manchu, a distorted Chinese figure, who always intends to steal secrets from the West. In the brochures of the film *Fu Manchu's Mask*, he was described as an extremely vicious figure, "every movement of his figure is a threat, every blink of his eyes is a sign of evil." And in the poster of the film, the white protagonists are drawn crouching out of fear in the shadow of Fu Manchu (Lu, 2003, p.65). The West creates this figure when a large number of Chinese poured into America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so they regard Chinese as a potential threat to them, the cheap source of labor who may rob their jobs and those intellectuals may steal their hi-technology away. Even today, the side effect of the stereotype is still lingering on. In May 2001, a major national survey of highly educated individuals showed that almost half of all Americans believe that Chinese Americans are likely to pass secret information to China. About a third agree that Chinese Americans are probably more loyal to China than to the United States. But the fact is that Chinese Americans have been living in this continent for over one hundred years, they have made great contributions to this country, but these facts are neglected or excluded from the American dominant discourse. So just as Foucault says,

discourse is not a transparent and neutral media through which people can get access to truth. Any discourse is restricted by certain power. The network of the relationship of power, through working on the instrument of mass media, permeates every field of human existence such as socio-politics, economy, ideology, ethnic, history, culture, institution and structure of class, sex, emotion and ect. ( Foucault, 1980, p.102)

Today we are dealing with a situation in which people are supposed to feel right that there is nothing except for the system, there is nothing except the "discourse industry". So facing the overwhelming Western media--the hegemonic discourse, the writers in the East have to conform to the standard of the West. As soon as the writers in the East do not act according to a prescribed set of rules they disappear from the Western mainstream society. So some writers in the East become assimilated by the Western hegemonic discourse. In order to cater to the taste of the Western dominant society, they try to conduct self-orientalization, highlighting the exotic, backward customs in their original culture, thus forming a new phenomenon—neo-orientalism. Having considered Foucault's views on power and its relation to discourse, it is important to be clear that the mass media is not the only conduit of this discourse. Education, religion, the workplace, state structures, etc. all play their part in the process of socialisation and societal control, through which the dominant discourse exerts its influence, while the discourse of the East is often in a marginalized

position. So it's urgent to establish a counter-discourse to subvert the hegemonic discourse so that a constructive relationship between the East and the West can be formed.

### 3. A SUBVERSIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE FORCE: COUNTER-DISOURSE ESTABLISHED THROUGH EDUCATION/ KNOWLEDGE

As we know, under "power" Foucault primarily sees a diversity of relationships populating and organizing a region, as well as strategies within which they achieve their effectiveness. According to Foucault, "power" is not an institution, not a structure, not one power belonging to a few who are empowered. "Power" is the name given to a complex strategic situation within a society. Power is not something that one attains, removes or shares. Power takes place at innumerable points in the game of unequal and movable relationships. Where there is power there is resistance. There is a dialectical relationship between power and resistance" (Foucault, 1972, p.53). Therefore the omnipresent and pervasive power is both a force of repression and construction. Foucault holds that strategy of power produces knowledge. There is a very sensitive relationship between power and knowledge. The function of knowledge is to sustain the existence of individual, with the aid of which people may apprehend the world. So in the eyes of Foucault, discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.

So based on this theory, Foucault has initiated a discourse politics. It calls for the marginalized groups to unite together to revolt against the hegemony of the dominant discourse, to disrupt the discursive structure, which is to unify the individuals into the regulated wholeness, to encourage the liberal development. In any society, discourse has its power mechanism, for the rules which are determinative to discourse set the standard for what is rationality, intellectual and truth. The order of discourse will decide what kind of speech and act is reasonable and legitimate. If the practice of discourse is antagonistic, then it will either be refused, or at least will be marginalized. Although all discourses are produced by power, they are not totally submissive to power. Being fully aware of the function of discourse and its power, Foucault points out two ways through which marginalized groups can disintegrate the monopoly of the dominant discourse. "One way is to desubjecticate the dominant power, that is, to conduct a political struggle for the equal rights of one's class. The other way is to reveal the hypocritical nature of the dominant group through cultural critics" (Xu, 1998, p.150). What Foucault's theory of discourse of power refers to is just the kind of cultural

critics. It is a kind of counter-discourse, which is an effective means to resist the prosecution of the dominant discourse and thus offer the right for the marginalized group to articulate their voices and express their ideas. As we all know, education is a prerequisite for cultural critics, for it is the main tunnel through which one gets knowledge about the world and the society around them. So education plays a very important role in enhancing people's social awareness and their understanding of cultural critics. And according to Foucault, the type of knowledge in any time is the power mechanism, and power is always connected with different forms of knowledge, there is a network of relationships between them. So any form of education is a political tool to maintain or verify its discourse, knowledge and power. However, where there is power, there is resistance. There is a dialectical relationship between discourse of power and resistance. Education, on one hand, is a way of acculturation for the Western dominant society, on the other hand, it can be used as a counter-discourse to subvert the domination of the Western hegemonic discourse. In the power relationship between the West and the East, such counter-discourses can take two forms: a) subvert the stereotypes that the West imposes on the East—exotic, submissive, irrational and even brutal; b) rewrite through literal texts the history that defined primarily by the Western hegemonic discourse. There is only “discontinuous and contradictory histories” and a unified History or harmonious Culture is a “myth” propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests (Zhu, 2001, p.259). So Foucault's theory of discourse of power offers us a concrete way of education—using writing as a counter-discourse to enlighten people's social awareness and in this way make them understand the nature of the Western dominant discourse—“the gentle violence”, thus deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of the Western dominant society. The prosperity of Chinese American literature in recent years can be seen as a successful example of using counter-discourse to revolt against the prejudiced discourse of American white society. Many Chinese American writers, with Frank Chin as the representative, make use of their pens as daggers to fight against the racial prejudice in American white society, and in this way, they awaken the Chinese people in America their ethnic awareness to fight for the equal rights in American society.

Here I'd like to take a Chinese American writer Frank Chin's works as examples to illustrate the function of counter-discourse. Because the long-established prejudice against Chinese American though they have lived in American continent over one hundred years, Frank Chin, as a forerunner of Chinese American literature, makes use of his pen as a dagger to fight against the racial prejudice in American white society, and in this way, he awakens the ethnic awareness of Chinese Americans to fight for the equal rights in American society. From the works of Frank Chin, we can see clearly his rebellious

writing motifs: On one hand, he fights bravely against the western hegemonic discourse with which the white racists impose prejudiced stereotypes on the Chinese Americans; on the other hand, he reproaches fiercely those Chinese Americans who try to cater to the taste of the West by self-orientalizing Chinese culture and Chinese people. Also, through his writing, Frank Chin expresses his wishes to propagate the orthodox Chinese culture and in this way to reconstruct a heroic Chinese American culture tradition. These motifs can be well shown in his early novel *Donald Duk* in which the protagonist is a twelve-year-old boy. In his history class, what the white teacher tells about the history of Chinese American is always indecent and humiliating. Through the researching in the library, he gets to know the contributions that the Chinese made for the construction of America, especially the hard work of Chinese people in building the railway in the wild west of America. Later in the history class, Donald Duk stands up to rectify the false history of his white teacher. So through the novel Frank Chin tries to arouse the collective memory of Chinese Americans and reveal the erased past of Chinese Americans, thus rewrite/rectify the History of America. In Frank Chin's another novel *Gunga Din Highway*, Frank Chin mainly depicts the development of Ulysses, the protagonist in the novel. In the novel, Ulysses and his friends are depicted as the outright “Chinese Beat Generation”, they rebel and challenge the American mainstream culture by resembling the defiant and unruly behaviors of the young American Blacks on the street. In this way, the author deconstructs the slavery and feminized stereotypes that the white racist imposed on Chinese people. Besides, through the education in a Chinese school and in the Chinese community he lives in, Ulysses and his Chinese friends get access to the “counter- discourse”—the education of Chinese culture, thus subvert the monopoly of the American dominant discourse. During the process of study in the Chinese school, Ulysses begins to realize their unique identity in the American society and at the same time, he gradually senses the hypocritical nature of the seemingly civilized social system in America and finally become the defender of the ethnic culture of Chinese Americans. So Frank Chin makes use of his writing as counter- hegemonic practice to declare a war towards the perpetuation of stereotypical images in American popular culture and the self-contempting conducts of those assimilated Chinese Americans. Hence, Chin's writings function as a subversive discourse to the stereotyped depiction of the western discourse on Chinese Americans and this kind of counter-discourse is of great significance in the construction of a dignified and heroic Chinese American identity, which coexists and enjoys equal rights with American mainstream society.

Another example which can illustrate the power of counter-discourse is Pearl Buck's works. Before Pearl's endeavor, to most Americans, China was the

ultimate Other. Almost all the information they learned about China was from western media which were full of prejudiced or playful portrayal. So in the mind of Americans, things in China are weird: When it's daytime here, it's night there; Their pens are soft but their pillows are hard; Their first names are their family names; It is always "Gentleman first", never "Lady First"; Chinese women bound their feet rather their waist; They respect the old much more than admire the young..... All these superficial and partial knowledge led to misunderstanding towards Chinese people. But Pearl's works, especially her novel *The Good Earth*, made the Chinese seem as familiar as neighbours for the first time, for her novel portrayed genuine images of Chinese peasants: How they lived, how they loved, how they toiled, how they thrived, how they suffered, and how they endured. Thus for the first time in history the majority of western readers learned about the majority of Chinese as they were through *The Good Earth*, which broke down many of the racial prejudices and thus improved the image of the Chinese in the eyes of western people. Her novels also introduced new ideas about the conflicts between the East and the West by demonstrating the tolerant Chinese attitude towards cultural differences. So in some sense, Pearl's writing also functions as a counter-discourse to break the long-standing mentality of the binary opposition between the East and the West, for she saw all the human being as a whole and on equal terms.

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## CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can see that in general the relationship between the East and the West is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony. However, Foucault's theory of discourse helps us to reveal the discontinuity and contradiction in the "History" narrated by the West and the "gentle violence" of the Western dominant discourse. Besides, it offers us a strategy to subvert the hegemonic discourse of the West—deconstructing the West dominant discourse by the counter-discourse of the marginalized group. At the same time, the counter-discourse can also be constructive by breaking the binary opposition between the East and the West, just as Pearl Buck's which can function as a constructive discourse, thus establishing a cultural bridge across the Pacific. So Foucault's theory of discourse offers us valuable enlightenment on the relationship between the East and the West. Although the conflicts

still exist between the East and the West, the power of power, that is, establishing a counter-discourse through education/knowledge (for example, through the writing of the eastern writers as is shown in this article) to utter the voice of the marginal, can help resist the prejudiced and partial dominant discourse. Besides, deconstructing the central position of the discourse of the West is not to establish another center—the dominant Eastern discourse, but to pursue an equal position with the West. In the multi-cultural society nowadays, the communication between the West and the East is a necessary and inevitable trend. Although discourse is a power mechanism, human nature of people from different cultures is the same. Through the constant communication, discourse can also become a tool to exchange ideas, thus the binary opposition between the East and the West can be converted into mutual understanding and mutual respect.

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