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**Orientalist Afterlives: Theorizing Discourse about Peppa Pig and
China**

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Orientalist Afterlives: Theorizing Discourse about Peppa Pig and China

‘There’s not a parent around that hasn’t heard of Peppa Pig... unless you go to China’ – Heart FM news (Westoby 2018)

‘Do foreigners also watch Peppa Pig (□□□□)?’ – question thread on *Zhihu*

Since its initial broadcast in 2005, the British animation *Peppa Pig* has become a global phenomenon, having been translated into over 40 languages and broadcast into over 180 territories (eOne 2021). This impressive linguistic and geographical reach has been accompanied by a diversification of *Peppa Pig* across platforms, as Peppa and her family have ventured beyond five-minute animations to become film stars, stuffed toys, and foodstuffs. *Peppa Pig* has also served as a source of adult satire, appearing in formal publications such as the *British Medical Journal* (Bell 2017) and *The Guardian* (McClintock 2013), as well as in user-generated online content. The latter transformations have, in turn, piqued the interest of English-language news outlets, especially after Peppa featured in various mock gangster-style imagery on Chinese websites and apps. Indeed, in their reporting on *Peppa Pig* and China, English-language news outlets have focused heavily on these appropriations and their censorship.

This article interrogates – and goes beyond – this discourse about *Peppa Pig* and censorship, to explore both how this British animation has been translated and localized to become a part of popular culture in China and how English-language news outlets have responded to Peppa’s presence in China. In taking seriously *Peppa Pig* and its surrounding discourse, I assert the importance of children’s animations, as cultural works consumed during formative years and regarded by China (among other states) as politically and economically important. Literature on the history of animation in China has frequently highlighted its political importance, showing for example how the 1930s-40s animations of the pioneering Wan Brothers were instilled with patriotic sentiment (Wu 2009). This politicisation continued into the 1950s, as the nationalisation of animation was accompanied by a patriotic quest to create works that reflected a Chinese ‘national spirit’ (Ehrlich and Jin 2001: 9–12; see also Macdonald 2016; Du 2019). These cultural works were produced to serve (rather than simply entertain) children, and by extension, the nation (see Wu 2009: 47). Chinese animation experienced a period of decline after the mid-1980s, with reduced state support and increased foreign competition (Wu 2009: 49–9). However, since the early 2000s, the post-Mao state has come to appreciate the importance of animation as not only a political tool but also an economic one. It has subsequently provided subsidies for domestic animation

studios whose original works are broadcast on television, and also provided protection against foreign competition by restricting the broadcast of imported animations during television primetime (Ishii 2013; Fung and Ho 2016).

These imported animations, including *Peppa Pig*, have received scant scholarly attention in comparison to the growing body of literature on domestic PRC animation (e.g. Macdonald 2016; Du 2019). However, outside of Chinese studies, *Peppa Pig* has generated significant academic interest. Various scholars have, for example, noted the show's combination of simple, two-dimensional animation (as if drawn by a child) and complex animal-human representations (Mills 2017: chap. 2; Mangiapane 2018; Korimboccus 2020).¹ Scholars of language pedagogy have also examined the show's child-friendly simplicity of language, including its slow speech rate, repetition of character names, and high frequency of common English words, arguing for its merits as a second-language learning tool (Prosic-Santovac 2017; Maranzana 2018; Scheffler, Jones, and Domińska 2021).

Studies on the wider discourse surrounding *Peppa Pig* do not currently exist. Although cultural studies – and attendant disciplines – takes all cultural works seriously, this inclusiveness does not always extend to the discourse surrounding historically lesser-regarded cultural works such as children's animation. This is regrettable since children's animation is received and discussed in complex ways. In the current literature, Eithne O'Connell's blunt division of audiences for children's programmes into two groups, that is, children and adults (2003: 227), only starts to explore this complexity. My article argues that discourse about *Peppa Pig* and China, particularly in the English language, has been influenced by a conceptualisation of 'the West' and China as cultural entities that are entirely distinct and often internally homogenous. English-language news articles, in particular, have drawn upon longstanding assumptions about a despotic 'Orient' vis-à-vis a progressive 'West' to dwell upon *Peppa Pig's* claimed censorship in China, with little consideration for how the animation transcended purported East/West boundaries to achieve popularity in China in the first place.

Such discourse about *Peppa Pig* and China is testimony to the durability of the Orientalism that Edward Said ([1978] 2003) once identified, as a pervasive way of imagining the Orient that continues even after the word 'Orient' has largely been discarded from mainstream discourse. However, the discourse that surrounds *Peppa Pig* is also necessarily

¹ Most characters are animals who generally act like humans but with certain animal traits (e.g. Mr Fox as a slippery salesman). There are also some animals that have not been anthropomorphized and a few completely human characters (e.g. the Queen).

distinct from this classic Orientalism. Most obviously, Said placed his emphasis on literary and academic representations of the colonial Middle East rather than journalistic representations of popular culture in post-socialist China. Said has frequently been referenced in Chinese studies to produce some innovative work on the representation of ethnic minorities (e.g. Gladney 1994; Schein 1997) and of the Occident (e.g. Chen 1995) within China, as well as on representations of the Orient and socialism in exterior discourse about the PRC (e.g. Vukovich 2012). However, there has also been a tendency to approach Said's critique of Orientalism as if it was as unbounded by space and time as the imagined Orient that he critiqued, so that his specific argument about literary representations of the Middle East has become a general argument about all representations of the 'Orient', including contemporary China. In order to overcome this theoretical pitfall, I look to another of Said's concerns, which was the ways in which theories develop as they travel from one set of conditions to another (1983). I thus ask, how can Said's work on Orientalism be developed as it travels to the analysis of discourse about animation in contemporary China?

In answer, my analysis reveals not so much a classic Orientalism as an *afterlife* of Orientalism, as a discourse that continues to stress East/West difference but lacks all but one of the three strands of Said's classic Orientalism. In his 1978 work, Said ([1978] 2003: 2–3) defined three strands of Orientalism: as an academic discipline; as a 'style of thought' based upon an epistemological and ontological distinction between Orient and Occident (between 'us' and 'them'); and as a discourse for 'dominating, structuring, and having authority over the Orient'. These strands are interlinked: the academic discipline sustained – and was sustained by – the colonialist discourse of Orientalism; while discipline and discourse both relied on – and reinforced – the basic epistemological and ontological distinction between Orient and Occident.

For sociologist Biray Kolluoglu-Kirli (2003), one of these strands, the discipline of Orientalism, died during the mid-twentieth century. She has described how the geopolitical shifts of power created by World War II led to the decline of European-based Orientalism and the rise of US-based area studies, which maintained a basic East/West binary, but with a shift from humanities to social sciences, and from the study of the ancient to the contemporary. Kollouglu-Kirli's history of the academy, while useful, includes an unannounced shift of disciplinary scope from 'the Orient' to the 'non-West', as area studies expanded to encompass regions such as Latin America and Eastern Europe. Area studies thus continued the Orientalist tradition of compartmentalizing knowledge according to geographical area but also went beyond even the broadest definition of 'the Orient' in their

studies of the Other. By bringing in Latin America and parts of Europe, area studies included Others that had long functioned in the construction of Western European identities, but which were overlooked by Said – at least in *Orientalism* – as he focused on representations of the Oriental Other (see MacKenzie 1995).²

Said was also not consistent in describing how many imaginary Orients had been constructed by Orientalists. On the one hand, he described how European and North American discourse conceptualized different Orients. On the other hand, he sometimes wrote as if Orientalism was an unchanging, monolithic discourse. An early response to Said in Chinese studies, from Benjamin Schwartz, argued that modern-day specialists of East Asian studies do not speak of a vague Orient, but rather of specific nations (or of ‘East Asia’) (1980: 15–16). Pierre Ryckman’s (Simon Ley) more violent rebuttal asserted that sinologists do not make statements about a mythical East, but rather about a ‘Chinese world’ whose ‘intellectual and physical boundaries’ are ‘sharply defined’ (1984: 18). However, this very notion of a bounded ‘Chinese world’ indicated that some sinologists continued to conceptualize a China that was entirely separate from the ‘West’. These early responses also ignored Said’s point that – despite dividing and subdividing its subject matter – academic Orientalism treated the ‘the East’ as a region of static civilizations in contrast to a dynamic ‘West’; it was a division according to (evolutionary) time as well as space.

In contemporary popular culture, contrasts between ‘the West’ and an exotic ‘East’ continue to abound in a way that indicates Said’s influence has struggled to extend beyond academia (Prado-Fonts 2008). These East/West contrasts include references to specific nation-states, so that Japan, Korea and China (among others) are all exoticized as Oriental but in somewhat different ways.³ Importantly, China is represented not only as an exotic, backward land, but also – increasingly – as a futuristic, albeit dystopian, place. In popular discourse about China, representations of timeless rural villages are increasingly replaced by representations of three-dimensional mega cities (Kendall 2015), while allusions to politically backward despotism coexist with concerns about 1984-esque hi-tech surveillance. With the economic and military rise of China, the unbalanced power relations that Said identified as crucial to the production of Orientalism have been eroded. Thus, Orientalism in Said’s third sense, as a way of ‘dominating, structuring, and having authority over the Orient’, has

² Said addressed some of these other Others in *Cultural and Imperialism* (1994)

³ This variation of Orientalist discourse according to nation-state is not new. See Yoshihara (2003: chap. 1) on the delineation of an Oriental cultural hierarchy in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century discourse of North America, with Japan at the top.

become untenable, at least where representations of China are concerned. Instead, an afterlife of Orientalism remains, in which a well-worn discourse about China as markedly different from ‘the West’ continues to resonate but in quite unstable ways. These ways include positive assessments of China’s distinctiveness, as well as negative assessments that conceptualize China not simply in classic Orientalist terms – as a backward land – but also as an undesirable future.

The first section of this paper describes how the dubbing of *Peppa Pig* into Chinese enabled promotional claims about the universality of this animation through the elimination of British regional and class-based accents. These accents, as socialist-linguistics markers of difference within the UK, undermine the very notion of a homogenous British, let alone ‘Western’, culture. Stripping them away, in turn, enables a conceptualisation of an East/West boundary as the only cultural boundary that matters. If a cultural product can, with some translational assistance, somehow negotiate this boundary, then it can subsequently be celebrated as universal, as initially occurred in promotional discourse about *Peppa Pig* following its success in China. The second section of this paper examines how this success prompted the creation of original Chinese-language content with the 2019 release of the film *Peppa Pig Celebrates Chinese New Year* (猪猪佩奇过大年). Although mainly intended for China, this film was also released internationally, gained global press coverage via its film trailer, and promotionally tied to the release of two China-themed episodes for the original British *Peppa Pig* animation. In this way, a Chinese version of Peppa came to exert a certain global influence over the *Peppa Pig* brand. However, this was also a self-Orientalist version of *Peppa Pig*, as promotional discourse shifted away from celebrating the universality of the translated cartoon towards stressing the film’s unique Chineseness. While this promotional discourse was relatively benign in its Orientalism, the third section of my paper examines how English-language news stories during 2018 and early 2019 produced a far more negative Orientalist afterlife in reporting on *Peppa Pig* and censorship. Mainly emanating from media outlets in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, this discourse was consistent with classic Orientalism in deriding China as politically and culturally backward, but also transcended this Orientalism in its treatment of China as technologically futuristic.

Universality and the Elimination of Social-Linguistic Markers

Since its official import to China in 2015, broadcasting on *Peppa Pig* has enjoyed phenomenal success, generating billions of views across platforms. Reflecting on the success

of *Peppa Pig* in China, Olivier Dumont, the managing director of the Family Brands division of Entertainment One (eOne), emphasized the universal appeal of the animation, arguing that it ‘resonates in the same manner’ nearly everywhere in the world with its stress on ‘family values and family life’. Dumont further remarked on the animation’s usage of animal characters rather than human children with an overtly ‘Western’ appearance, as well as the compatibility of Peppa’s pigness and redness with the Chinese market. Dumont even suggested that *Peppa Pig*’s family-oriented content was more acceptable to Mainland parents than domestic animations with their comparatively high levels of violence (Colman 2017).

Dumont did not mention translation in his interview. However, despite its usual invisibility (Venuti 1995), translation has played a crucial role in enabling his claims about *Peppa Pig*’s global resonance. With the animation’s main target audience consisting of pre-literate pre-schoolers, dubbing was the only viable method of translation. As theorized by Antje Ascheid, dubbing, in contrast to subtitles, ‘succeeds in effacing the fact of the film text’s foreign origin’ (1997: 39). Whereas subtitling openly advertises itself as a translation, dubbing hides this aspect, obscuring the source vocals so that it becomes difficult to ascertain whether it constitutes an accurate translation. Translational accuracy even ceases to matter when audiences – without access to the source vocals – treat the dubbed version as an original work (Ascheid 1997: 34–35). Ascheid subsequently argues that audiences generally do not perceive dubbed characters as ‘others’ but rather as ‘hybrid species’. Commenting on the German dubbing of Hollywood films, she describes the dubbed characters as ‘what Germans would be like if they were Americans’ (1997: 36).

As anthropomorphized animals, the characters of *Peppa Pig* are even more receptive to this denationalization through dubbing, facilitating promotional claims about the universal qualities of this animation. *Peppa Pig* has been dubbed into Chinese Mandarin twice; it began broadcasting on CCTV in 2015 as *Little Pig Peiqi* (小猪佩奇), while Eastern Broadcasting Corporation in Taiwan acquired the rights to broadcast the animation on its children’s channel *Yo Yo* in 2012 under the name *Peipei Pig* (佩佩猪). There are certainly differences between the two translations, particularly the Taiwanese version’s tendency to reflect the source text’s child-friendly simplicity of language, in contrast to the explicitation and repetitiveness of the PRC version. However, both versions share a similar translational approach towards the many regional and class-based accents of the British *Peppa Pig*, removing them and using a single standardized version of Chinese in their place. In doing so, these dubbed translations further flatten out the foreignness of *Peppa Pig*, to facilitate the

claim that the animation – or at least what remains after dubbing – ‘resonates in the same manner’ around the world.

Despite this claim, it should be noted that the two Mandarin Chinese versions of *Peppa Pig* do not sound the same. The Taiwanese version reflects the child-friendly approach of the source vocals, with high-pitched voices, deliberate (childlike) mistakes of language, and frequent sentence-final interjections; there are lots of ‘ahs’, ‘ohs’ and ‘wus’. Peppa often speaks in exaggerated or distorted tones, evincing a calculated cuteness, as she attempts to prevail in negotiations with various adults, particularly her parents. Meanwhile, her little brother George stumbles over words, just as he does in the source text; ‘Ganggy Ig’ (Grandpa Pig), for example, is rendered as 哥哥 [哥哥]. The Taiwanese *Peipei Pig* thus draws on a culture of cuteness that is frequently associated with Taiwan (see Dale 2016; Yueh 2017). In comparison, the PRC version has a lower-pitched, rather adult-sounding Peppa Pig, while her brother George pronounces his limited vocabulary without mistakes.

However, despite not sounding the same, both translations impose a socio-linguistic uniformity, eliminating the regional- and class-based accents that were central to the British *Peppa Pig*. These knowingly stereotypical voices of the British version – such as the cockney accent of shiftily salesman Mr Fox, the home counties poshness of Granny Pig, and the ‘*Allo!*’ accent of Madame Gazelle – introduce children to a wide range of accents and provide an additional layer of humour for adult viewers. These social-linguistic markers of difference also complicate the idea of a singular national British culture, let alone a ‘Western’ culture.

Research on the dubbing of class- and regional- based accents, which has focused on English-Italian dubbing, has stressed the difficulties of rendering these social-linguistic differences in the target language. In Italy, the dominant method, particularly when addressing linguistic differences that are internal to the nation rather than ‘foreign’ accents (Minutella 2021: 80–84), is the blanket imposition of a ‘pure’ standardising language that everyone understands but nobody speaks (Chiaro 2008; Minutella 2021: 89–90). To an extent, this also serves as a description of the Chinese in the PRC version of *Peppa Pig*, which sometimes sounds more like standard *translated* Mandarin than standard Mandarin.

Scholars have also noted attempts to use Italian dialects and accents in the dubbing of comedies and cartoons, which seem to be partial exceptions to the homogenising principle (Chiaro 2009: 159). *The Simpsons* is one such example in Italian, in which groundskeeper Willie speaks in a Sardinian dialect and Chief Wiggum in Neapolitan (Dore 2009). The Taiwan market has also seen the mixed usage of Mandarin and Hokkien for dubbed films,

particularly animation, where comedic elements are brought out by the usage of regional dialects (Cheng 2014: 79). Certainly, there is a rich variety of Mandarin accents which could potentially have been used as substitutes for the source text accents of *Peppa Pig* (e.g. northeast accent for honest, down-to-earth worker Mr Bull). Indeed, Mandarin accents – as well as other regionalec[t]s⁴ – have already been richly employed for humorous (adult) ends in user-generated appropriations of the animation.

However, there is also scholarly scepticism as to the possibility of finding equivalence through the substitute of accents and dialects across languages (e.g. Pym 2000; Chiaro 2008; Minutella 2021: 80), as well as fears that translators may end up perpetuating existing social-linguistic stereotypes.⁵ To translate accents and dialects requires moving away from a model of translating across bounded, singular national cultures, where difference equals national difference,⁶ and towards a model of translating across complex, overlapping networks of social-linguistic difference. Britain and China are alike in being complicated by fissures of class, ethnicity and region (among other things), but these fissures also intersect differently to produce networks of social-linguistic identities (and stereotypes) that are extremely difficult to translate into another language. However, my concern here is not whether these social-linguistic markers are truly untranslatable but rather how the removal of these markers produces a homogenization of foreignness. Once flattened out, with the pluralities of class and regional difference swept aside, this foreignness comes to exist alongside Chineseness in a simplistic binary. Working across this one-dimensional conceptualization of difference, there is the potential for a foreign work to be domesticated with such success that it may even be declared universal, as has occurred with the Chinese dubbing of *Peppa Pig*.

Following the success of the dubbed version, promotional literature about *Peppa Pig's* success has stressed the universal resonance of the animation's themes, with frequent mention of 'family values' (e.g. Alizila 2018; eOne 2018), which – these texts claim – make it compatible with Chinese audiences. In contrast, the less adaptable network of social-linguistic difference has been removed. Shorn of their regional and class-based features, the animal characters of *Peppa Pig* can be more easily inserted into the popular culture of China, which has a long animated history of anthropomorphized animals, albeit with an enforced

⁴ See DeFrancis (1984: chap. 3) on 'regionalec[t]' as a term existing between 'language' and 'dialect'.

⁵ Lippi-Green (1997: chap. 5) found that negative Disney characters often speak in accents associated with marginalized groups. Translating these accents may reinforce the marginalization of social-linguistic groups in the target language; see Ferrari (2010) on southern Italian dialects in dubbing.

⁶ This model of translating across national cultures is, of course, further complicated by Taiwan's political status.

hiatus during the second half of the Mao era (see Du 2019: chap. 4). Furthermore, as elaborated in the next section, linguistic markers of regional and class-based difference ironically resurface in the Chinese-language film *Peppa Pig Celebrates Chinese New Year* and its trailer, where they are subsequently heralded by promotional literature as crucial elements of ‘Chinese culture’

Peppa Pig Celebrates the Chinese New Year

Whereas Olivier Dumont cited the global resonance of family values and animal characters to explain the initial success of *Peppa Pig* in China, a discourse of cultural particularism accompanied the subsequent emergence of the Chinese-language film *Peppa Pig Celebrates Chinese New Year*, co-produced by eOne and Alibaba Pictures. While acknowledging the family values that had purportedly made the brand popular in China in the first place, promotional materials – and accompanying newspaper articles – stressed the film’s Chineseness. ‘Through our collaboration with eOne, we have created a beautiful Peppa Pig story immersed in Chinese New Year tradition and culture,’ said Wei Zhang, president of Alibaba Pictures, in an *Alizila* article (Chou 2019). The same article stressed the ‘traditional customs’ of the storyline, all of which related to the Chinese New Year. It also stressed the Chineseness of the film’s promotional trailer, *What is Peppa?* (□□□□□), quoting a US venture firm partner’s assertion that ‘Taking tactics that work in the United States and simply translating them is going to be insufficient.... This Peppa trailer reflects a deep, deep understanding of Chinese culture: family duty, generational love, rural cities, community, Chinese New Year.’ The original *Peppa Pig* series had already been ‘simply’ translated for the China market with great success, and this success was a necessary condition for the very existence of the film, yet the mere linguistic translation of universal family values was now deemed insufficient.

This new emphasis on the Chineseness of *Peppa Pig* extended to the content of the film and its trailer, which are both – despite their aesthetic differences⁷ – self-consciously localized works. One key method for signalling Chineseness, highlighted in promotional materials, was an emphasis on festivals. The trailer’s story occurs during the period leading up to the Chinese New Year, while the film – as suggested by its title – focuses upon a family gathering during the New Year period itself. Festive periods, as intensifications of everyday

⁷ The trailer is a comic but heartfelt exploration of the rural-urban divide, whereas the film relies on well-worn stereotypes about the north-south divide in China.

life (Lefebvre [1958] 1991: 201–7), create far stronger contrasts with the cultural practices of other countries than can be achieved through displays of the ordinary everyday. This can also be seen in posters for the film, which show the various characters of *Peppa Pig* in self-Orientalist depictions of China and the New Year. One poster, for example, shows the family putting up red couplets on the front of a courtyard building shrouded in mist. The scene exudes an exotic character far removed not only from the suburban environment of the British *Peppa Pig* but also the spatial realities of contemporary China, whether urban or rural.

A second key method, less highlighted in the promotional materials, was the reintroduction of regional and class-based differences that had been removed in the initial dubbing of *Peppa Pig* but were now reinserted in order to assert Chineseness. In the trailer, much of the humour derives from the accents and habits of northern rural China, as an elderly villager tries to ascertain what exactly is this ‘*Peiqi*’ (Peppa) that his grandson wants as a present. This rural China is contrasted with the urban China of the grandson and his parents, as the family strive to bridge the rural-urban divide and spend the New Year together. *The People’s Daily* (Lu 2019) opined that ‘the resonance of this uniquely Chinese feeling’ (□□□□□□□□□□) of longing for family reunion was the main reason for this video’s popularity in China, with its 31 million online views. Whereas family values had previously been universal, they were now specifically Chinese. While this trailer examined China’s rural-urban divide, the film – in far less subtle terms – emphasized north-south difference, pitting a brash northern grandmother against a reserved southern grandmother in a battle for familial supremacy during the Chinese New Year. These self-consciously localized live-action scenes were somewhat incongruously interspersed with five-minute episodes taken directly from the British *Peppa Pig*, albeit including two episodes, *Chinese New Year* and *The Panda Twins*, that had been created with the Chinese market in mind.

While the focus on festivities is compatible with overseas Orientalist expectations of ‘Chinese culture’, this insertion of regional accents presented the same obstacles for achieving success in markets beyond the source language that had initially been present in the British *Peppa Pig*. The film received a limited release in the United States, with its distributors stressing ‘an increasing appreciation for and interest in Chinese culture’ in the US (Hahm 2019). At the same time, they indicated that a targeting of Mandarin speakers by mainly distributing the film in US cities with large Chinese populations. Crucially, the film was subtitled rather than dubbed into English, making it very difficult for any preschooler without good Chinese listening skills to follow the film, and indicating little genuine

enthusiasm for this film's global potential. Even the British *Peppa Pig* episodes within the film kept their Chinese dubbing for the international release, with the addition of English subtitles rather than the restoration of the original English voices.

The film was not a success in the United States, with a gross of just 131,225 USD (Box Office Mojo no date). It was not a huge success in China either, with a gross of 18.5m USD comparing unfavorably with the 25.8m USD achieved by the 2018 re-release of the 1980s Japanese animation *My Neighbour Totoro* (Box Office Mojo no date). Online comments indicated dissatisfaction – and even rage – towards the film within China, with complaints about the recycling of old British *Peppa Pig* episodes and the poor quality of the live-action scenes. Despite this commercial failure, the film's release received numerous column inches in English-language news outlets. However, these news stories turned out to be less concerned with the film itself than with using it as a hook to revive an older story about the claimed censorship of *Peppa Pig* in China.

Peppa Pig and Censorship

In late April and early May 2018, English-language news media was awash with stories about the censorship of *Peppa Pig* in China. One of the most accurate reports came from the China-focused *What's on Weibo*, which stated that the short video app Douyin had removed '30,000 short videos relating to British cartoon *Peppa Pig*' (Koetse 2018). It further described how these user-generated videos had been created by disaffected 'society people' (□□□), who had made humorous videos featuring the innocent-looking Peppa in unlikely adult contexts, including as a violent gangster.

As the story was transmitted across the English-language news sphere, details about the scale of censorship and the censoring agent began to mutate. A number of articles carried headlines and opening paragraphs which gave the impression that the CCP had directly censored all instances of *Peppa Pig* in China. An early example, published in *The New York Times* on May 1, evoked the purges of Nazism with its opening paragraph: 'First they came for Winnie the Pooh. Now it appears China's censors may have their sights on another cuddly cartoon turned subversive symbols: Peppa Pig' (Qin 2018). This reinforced the sentiments of the headline, 'Peppa Pig, Unlikely Rebel Icon, Faces Purge in China'. Only in the subsequent paragraph did the article note that this was the censorship of a single site, and only in the fourth paragraph did it clarify that the censoring agent was Douyin rather than the CCP. While some articles reproduced this mixing of sensationalist opening language and belated

clarifying detail, others disposed of the detail completely. Two days later, *The Washington Post*, continuing the associations with mid-twentieth-century purges, published an opinion piece with the headline ‘Then they came for Peppa Pig’ (Rogin 2018). It claimed that ‘Chinese censors’ had started to remove Peppa Pig ‘from Internet apps and Chinese social media over the past week’. With no reference to Douyin, the journalist claimed a more general ‘purging’ of Peppa Pig from China. These claims about direct and total CCP censorship were sometimes taken as well-researched fact by other publications, such *The Guardian*, which later published a correction beneath one of its articles, clarifying that it has been amended ‘to remove references to China banning Peppa Pig cartoons and make clear that the entity that removed the cartoons was Douyin video platform’ (Boyd 2018).

After a few days, the stories stopped, before returning towards the end of 2018 with the promotion of *Peppa Pig Celebrates Chinese New Year*. The release of this Chinese-language film provided concrete evidence that there was no nationwide censorship of *Peppa Pig*. However, with over half a year having elapsed since the first batch of news reports, this second batch actually produced more significant mutations. The story – now in many articles – became that the CCP *had* banned Peppa Pig from China, but was now reversing its policy to allow the new movie after bowing to public opinion. Or, as a journalist for *New Corps Australia* put it: ‘In the red corner is the Communist Party of China. In the pink corner is everyone’s favourite porcine pal, Peppa Pig. Guess which side just won the popularity prize fight?’ (Seidel 2019). The article asserted that the ‘family values’ of the show had resonated with Chinese parents but ‘Peppa and her innocent family antics were decreed as a purveyors [sic] of counterculture’. As a result, ‘every trace of Peppa and her family were [sic] erased from Chinese digital streaming sites’. Other news articles did not manage to reproduce this level of hyperbole, but did frequently assert a reversal of state policy; with China previously having a ‘standing ban on Peppa Pig’ (Cann 2019), the film’s release was ‘likely to cause embarrassment for senior cultural figures’ in the CCP (Martin 2018).

In this way, the emphasis of the film’s promoters on spreading knowledge of Chinese cultural practices gave way to claims about CCP censorship practices and public resistance to the state. It is, of course, true that there has been a tightening of censorship practices in China in recent years, while developments such as the Hong Kong National Security Law indicate the increasing reach of these practices (see Hoffman 2021). However, inaccurate claims about the complete censorship and then rehabilitation of *Peppa Pig*, far from being useful contributions to the critique of CCP censorship, constitute an afterlife of Orientalism. Unlike the relatively benign self-Orientalism of the film’s promotional discourse, these newspaper

articles drew upon a long-standing representation of China as politically backward that has tended to evoke not just an ancient China but also the recent Maoist past. For David Vukovich, global intellectual discourse treats this period as ‘some kind of oriental aberration, a despotic nightmare from which [China] is still trying to fully awake’ (2012: 47). The Mao era brought an end to China’s political subjugation and began to erode the unbalanced power relations that sustained colonialist discourse, yet traces of Orientalism survived and interwove with the denigration of the socialist Other as politically backward. In some English-language news stories on *Peppa Pig*’s censorship, ‘purge’, a word closely associated with twentieth-century state socialism (as well as national socialism), was reactivated to refer to the removal of a cartoon pig from a short video app. This was China as politically and culturally backward; indeed, comically backward, as newspapers poked fun at the idea that *Peppa Pig* might be considered some kind of threat to the state. In such discourse, cultural practices in China do not become newsworthy until they become either targets of censorship or rallying points for political resistance against the state.

However, in a break from classic Orientalism, some of these articles also contained an implicit understanding of China as technologically advanced, with the ability to remove all trace of *Peppa Pig* from the Chinese-language internet (Seidel 2019), and even render the cartoon unknown to Chinese parents (Westoby 2018). In such cases, this was no longer a classic Orientalist discourse of ‘dominating, structuring, and having authority over the Orient’ so much as an *afterlife* of Orientalism that lamented the CCP’s continued authority over China. This authority was enforced through a technology sophistication that was shockingly impressive in its ability to censor and control.

Some articles also characterized the appropriation of *Peppa Pig* by ‘society people’ as a ‘symbol of rebellion’ against this communist state oppression (Westoby 2018; Cann 2019). The cultural theorist Wang Jing (2001) once critiqued the journalistic understanding of ‘the people’ as a site of resistance against the dominance of the oppressive state; culture produced by the former is ‘unofficial’, as against the ‘official’ culture of the latter. As with the erasure of British socio-linguistic difference in the dubbing of *Peppa Pig*, such discourse has generally been unencumbered by the idea that ‘the people’ of China might be demographically and ideologically diverse. However, nearly two decades after Wang’s article, contemporary English-language news discourse on *Peppa Pig* in China has tended to conceptualize a ‘subculture’ or ‘counterculture’ as resistant, rather than ‘the people’ as a whole, again suggesting a somewhat diluted strain of Orientalism. This discourse also draws upon and then reshapes the language of PRC state media, which broke the story of Douyin’s

ensorship. English-language articles in *The Global Times* (Shan 2018) and *The People's Daily* (2018) used 'subculture' to refer specifically to user-generated appropriations of *Peppa Pig*. Journalists in overseas news organizations subsequently claimed that PRC state media – and by extension the CCP – saw the original *Peppa Pig* animation itself, rather than its appropriations, as subcultural and subversive. Such a claim was crucial in order to critique the CCP as comically backward in its cultural politics. To focus instead on user-generated appropriations would have entailed reflection on the morality of merging a children's character with sometimes violent and sexualized content. In contrast, when confronted with the creation of violent *Peppa Pig* appropriations on the English-language internet, journalists have condemned them as the 'sick videos' (Charlton 2018) of 'trolls' (Cann 2019), rather than lauding them as countercultures of resistance. The point here is certainly not to condone censorship, but rather to note how news articles about user-generated content differ so greatly in their discursive emphases according to a story's geographical location.⁸

As the story travelled from PRC state media into US, UK and Australian publications, 'subculture' also sometimes morphed into 'counterculture'. Whereas the former term indicates a marginal group, the latter term suggests a political stance of resistance to the state. In the second batch of English-language articles, appearing around the release of the *Peppa Pig* film, this counterculture even sometimes became conflated with 'the people' as a whole, as some reporters heralded the film's release as a victory for the people against state censorship. To reach that point of misinformation, it should be emphasized, required a complex chain of rewriting that transformed initially accurate stories about Douyin's limited censorship into the CCP's complete and direct censorship of *Peppa Pig*. Later journalists did not necessarily set out to create a distorted account of *Peppa Pig* in China, but were rather drawn during the process of rewriting towards existing discourses, including an afterlife of Orientalism that understands China as a land of the politically absurd and the technologically advanced.

Conclusion

This article has examined three elements of *Peppa Pig*'s entanglement with China: the dubbing of the British animation into Chinese; the release of a Chinese-language film; and English-language news discourse on *Peppa Pig* in China. While these three elements share a

⁸ Journalists have also generally overlooked how eOne responded positively to Douyin's censorship of user-generated content as a protection of the *Peppa Pig* brand (see Moon 2019).

clear thematic link – of *Peppa Pig* and China, this paper has also argued for a theoretical link. Dubbers, promoters and journalists have all tended to strip out the complexities that complicate nations and regions, and instead sought either correspondence or opposition between monolithically imagined cultures. The dubbers of *Peppa Pig* replaced the regional and class-based linguistic complexity of the British animation with a single standardized accent. Following the success of *Peppa Pig* in China, promoters highlighted the universal ‘family values’ of the animation, but also stressed the need for a subsequent Chinese-language film to be reflective of ‘Chinese culture’. This self-conscious localization of *Peppa Pig* ironically involved the re-insertion of regional difference as part of its emphasis on the distinctiveness of Chinese national culture. Finally, various English-language news outlets asserted difference between China and their countries of publication (or more generally, ‘the West’) by – unconsciously or otherwise – transforming Douyin’s censorship of user-generated content into the CCP’s ‘purging’ of *Peppa Pig* from China.

There are, of course, differences in these geographical conceptualizations of culture. Whereas the localization of *Peppa Pig Celebrates Chinese New Year* constituted a relatively benign conceptualization of East/West cultural difference, English-language news reporting on *Peppa Pig* in China has been far more negative, representing it as a land so strange and despotic that even *Peppa Pig* is banned. As an afterlife of Orientalism, rather than the kind of inescapable discourse that Said described, by no means all media articles conveyed this understanding of China; sensationalist pieces about the criminalization of *Peppa Pig* existed alongside accurate accounts of Douyin’s censorship of user-generated appropriations. This afterlife has also mingled classical Orientalist depictions of China as politically and culturally backward with an implicit understanding of China as technologically advanced, to the extent that *Peppa Pig* can be entirely wiped from the country’s online and physical space.

These differences also suggest that the durability of an East/West binary lies in the multiple services that it performs, which extend far beyond the European imperialist domination of the Orient that Said once described. Chen Xiaomei (1995), for example, has described how various groups in Reform-Era China strategically constructed a Western Other in order to promote their various domestic political agendas. In the contemporary world, an East/China binary can be activated, on the one hand, for advertising purposes, to promote the Chineseness of a translated animated pig, or on the other hand, for headline-making purposes, to claim that this same animated pig has been entirely banned from China (and thus illustrate the absurdity of the CCP). Thus, notions of ‘the West’ and China as eternally different serve the multiple interests of multiple groups, from mainstream English-language newsmakers to

the CCP itself. Therefore, while the profoundly unequal power relations that were essential to Said's classic Orientalism are no longer evident – at least in the case of China – the East/West binary that lay at the heart of this Orientalism continues to shape contemporary discourse, even in the translation, marketing and reception of cartoon pigs.

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