

ORIGIN OF THE TERM "BARBARIAN"

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Abstract: The concept of "foreigner" in Chinese had always been ambiguous in its patterns and substantial semantic connotations. No matter how multitudinous and substantial they used to be, in the vast corpus of Western literature, they were matched with the single term "barbarian" for a long time. Regardless of the unique connotations of each Chinese term, the whole idea of "Chinese foreigner" was constricted to a dichotomy on the civilized-barbarian fault line. This paper argues the basic idea of the term "barbarian".

Keywords: barbarian, logos, nomos, Sinology

"Barbar" Kavramının Kökeni

Öz: Çin dilinde yabancı kavramı, semantik çağrışım ve desenleriyle çok yönlü ve katmanlıdır. Buna karşın batı dillerinde yazılan eserlerin oluşturduğu zengin literatür içinde Çince terimler çoğunlukla "barbar" ile karşılanmıştır. Bunun sonucu olarak Çince terimlerin asıl anlamları göz ardı edilmiş ve Çin'in geleneksel yabancı anlayışı, batının uygar-barbar ikiliğine indirgenmiştir. Bu yazıda "barbarlık" mefhumu ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: barbar, logos, nomos, Sinoloji

Barbarian Dichotomy¹

The concept of "foreigner" in Chinese had always been ambiguous in its patterns and substantial semantic connotations. No matter how multitudinous and substantial they used to be, in the vast corpus of Western literature, they were matched with the single term; "barbarian". It also seems clear that, most of the scholarship on China preferred to use the

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¹ This paper was presented in Young Sinologist Program held in Xi'an in 2016. Then it was rejected for being political during the publishing period with this excuse: "涉及政治体制话题，比较敏感"

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term "barbarian" in place of original Chinese ones.² Interestingly enough, it seems people thoroughly felt no hesitation for this rendering and freely use it without a satisfying explanation or any real debate given. However, only with a slight glimpse on this "matching practice", one may figure out that (1) the geographical and peculiar aspects of Chinese terms are neglected and made insignificant or identical; (2) the differences between the terms, which correspond to the neighboring people, recklessly turned into a conceptually "uniformed other", namely "the barbarian". Regardless of the unique connotations and aspects of each Chinese term, the whole idea of "Chinese foreigner" was restricted to a civilized-barbarian fault line and dichotomy.

Besides some other synthetic dualities, this distinction will not be discussed here. In this context, this paper's argument is that the Western discrimination of "the other" which manifests itself within the duality of "civilized" and "barbarian" did not occur in traditional China in a similar way; or even if it did, it was at least not at the same depth and sharpness. Specifically, Chinese distinction between the "self" and "the other" had occurred within the conceptualization scopes of Chinese thinking and in general, sought in a broader cosmological scale which is primarily based on *yin-yang* dichotomy.

The term "barbarian" was at first hand originated in ancient Greek. But to a common extent it gradually designated the conceptualization of "the West's other". Even though the root term "barbarian" produced more derivatives of its own; in turn, the employment of new terms strengthened the semantics and connotations of "barbarian". With the help of different

² May see different works of James Legge, Eduard Chavannes, Owen Lattimore, Marcel Granet, John K. Fairbank, Bernhard Karlgren, C.P. Fitzgerald, Michael Loewe and many others.

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disciplines, it gradually flourished in many Latin languages and even in some others. In English only, "barbarian" has many derivatives as adjectives, adverbs and some idiomatic phrases that also have pejorative meanings. In some prominent dictionaries and encyclopedias, current explanations are available. (1) "a member of a group of people from a very different country or culture that is considered to be less socially advanced and more violent than your own" (2) "a person with little education who has no interest in art and culture". Barbaric (adj.); "extremely cruel and unpleasant"; barbarically (adv.); barbarism (n.); "extremely cruel and unpleasant behavior"; barbarity (n.), "behavior that is very cruel, or a very cruel act." In Oxford Online Dictionary we also find similar meanings which are quite naïve or mild. However, we notice that the newer the dictionary is, the softer the explanations become. So another glance into the earlier editions of the same reference guides, we see more derogatory attitudes. "Uncivilized", "cruel and savage" in noun form; "villain", "inhuman", "savage", "wild", and "uncivilized" as adjectives; and it goes on with the "barbaric", "barbarism" and more. There is also one entry which denotes its earlier connection with logos and language, that is the "grammatical error". Others, as adverbs, verbs and adjectives; barbarity, barbarize, barbarous, barbarously are also present, having the same content and explanations (Oxford, 1990: 117). Britannica has a brief explanation on it which recalls the same idea and provides earlier connections; "... [this word] through time achieved this pejorative meaning mingled with the Ancient Greeks' attribution to their neighbors" (Ana Britannica, 1987: c.3., 325).

Greeks used the term "barbarian" for peoples living a pastoral or a nomadic life, emphasizing their unregulated life styles. However, the term in Greek primarily had the meaning

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of the "people who speak nonsense" says the editor of Aristotle's *Politics* in the preface (Aristotle, 2009: xv). Thus Aristotle used the term "barbarian" specifically to signify foreigners' improper language capabilities. In this regard, the language became the measuring criterion for discriminating "barbarians" from "civilized citizens of the polis". Even though the barbarians had their own languages, they were presumed to be unable to distinguish "the good and the bad". So the language "becomes the means for manifesting the proper and improper and the just and the unjust", that was only within the Greeks' capability of "having the sensation of the good and the bad..."³ (Aristotle, 2009: 1253a, 7-18). Overall, the "life for good" was inherent to the "polis" and beyond its actual and conceptual borders there was only the "bare life" which Aristotle named as "*zoe*". By which the life known to anyone was conceptually divided into two peculiar spheres; "*zoe* the bare life" and "*bios* the political life of the polis"⁴.

As "barbarians" were seen as primitive creatures living in a lower stage of life, the Aristotelian perception excluded them from the accredited scope of wisdom. Outside the polis, all people were destined to be deficient in merits for creating arts and philosophy. He insistently argued that the "barbarians" were rough and wild in nature. Assuming that they were primitive in quality, he labeled them as being stuck within the scopes of trivial daily behavior, which hardly secure their requirements for daily needs. (Aristotle, 2009: 1257a5) Their decentralized and hereditary administration praxis was also enough for him to justify their belonging to the same class with

³ Similarly, Epicurus also emphasized when he had said, "no one is capable of philosophizing unless he is Greek." (Wardy, 2000: 88)

⁴ Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (*bios theōrētikos*) from the life of pleasure (*bios apolaustikos*) and the political life (*bios politikos*) in *Nicomachean Ethics* (Agamben, 2006: 9)

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the slaves. (Aristotle, 2009: 1252b2) In terms of economic activities, "barbarians" had a primitive barter economy, lacked creating any value and for this reason they were incapable of composing artistic products. (Aristotle, 2007:4-5) Regardless of their cultural and national features, for him they were mere "barbarians" as "barbarity" was inherent to their primal nature.

In this sense, *zoe* and *bios* were the concept couple which gave the primary proof and the concrete shape of the western perception of "the other". These two simply enabled a conceptual way for dividing nature and life decisively into two spheres; thus the civilized people achieved the "nomos" by means of "logos" and the others who belong to the "wilderness", not having the proper language to possess "logos", were left out. So "the other" had no right to decide on "just" and "unjust"; "the good" and "the bad". For lacking the proper tool (language) for thinking (logic), they merely did not have the right or the ability to combine power with justice (nomos), since the combination of power and justice used to be the only means for achieving *nomos*, which we may simply render as "law".⁵ However, "nomos" owes its semantic roots to the concept of "land and soil", from which we also see another term, "nomad" derived as well.⁶ Thus, in a specific sense *nomos* being the land settled by Greeks (polis), in turn gives the formative basis for "norms" and "law" which are unique to a specific land; while the "nomadic barbarians" were the

⁵ On "nomos" see Plato Republic 358–359; identification with "law, custom or convention" (Stalley, 1995, viii). But indeed, the *nomos* was more than a simple equivalent of "law", it is discussed in detail see Agamben's "Homo Sacer".

⁶**Nomad** (n.) 1550s, from M.Fr. *nomade* (16c.), from L. *Nomas* (gen. *Nomadis*) "wandering groups in Arabia," from Gk. *nomas* (gen. *nomados*, pl. *nomades*) "roaming, roving, wandering" (to find pastures for flocks or herds), related to *nomos* "pasture, pasturage, grazing," lit. "land allotted," and to *nemein* "put to pasture," originally "deal out," from PIE root **nem-* "to divide, distribute, allot". <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=nomad>

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wanderers of all lands, having no "land" of their own where they may create established values. One can clearly see that, "barbarians" were condemned just for speaking some other language. Similarly, Aristotle presumed a distinction between "Europeans and Asians", derogating Asians for being "servile" by nature. He also drew a parallelism that leads to the Asian=barbarian and European=civilian match, but Greeks still had a higher degree over them in a conceptual manner (Aristotle, 2009: 1285a16). As a result, Asians were destined to be servants for good (Aristotle, 2009: 1327b18) .

When the Roman Empire inherited the worldview of Ancient Greeks, the same discriminatory practices were implemented within their imperial ideas. Through the Roman period, the dichotomy of "civilized" and "barbarian" has grown sharper. Even after the Roman Church had seized power, pagans who were destined to comply with the religion, took their place between the "barbarians" and the Christians. By then the "barbarians" had already been pushed a lot further down, so much so that they no longer had the chance of achieving salvation". (Fabian, 1999: 50) Centuries later, by means of Classical and Romantic ideologies, Enlightenment Movement also adopted the intellectual heritage of Ancient Greece and Rome. As Susan P. Mattern said earlier, "Ancient Greeks invented... [and] ...Romans began a long tradition of western perception of 'the barbarian'. The relation between these perceptions and later imperialist efforts such as the Crusades, the conquest of the New World, or nineteenth-century European imperialism is obvious..." (Mattern, 2002: 70). So we see the concept of "the barbarian" continued to rise with Crusaders, geographical discoveries and Western imperialism. It elevated on the same basis and within the same ideological perspective.

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Greeks and Romans modelled the understanding of the foreigner in the Western world, which was refined and labeled on the centerline of the term "barbarian". And it was not a simple word used for addressing "the other" in a narrow sense because it was also a useful tool for categorizing, contempt and humiliation. "The humiliation of barbarian peoples was not only worthwhile but [had] very important goals in it..." (Mattern, 2002: 163). Through "the Dark Ages", scholastic thought dominated the intellectual spheres of Europe for a thousand years. During this period, the same cultural heritage was processed, refined and improved. The legacy from the ancient world passed through the Enlightenment Movement, left a heritage to the modern nation-states and finally showed its beastly face in 19th and 20th century imperialist expansions. On its peak point, Europe's discriminatory discourse reached its limits to the worst: the anti-Semitism of the Second World War.

In the beginning of the Modern Age, on different parts of the world a similar approach brought about some different terminology in addition to the "barbarian". "Primitive", "undeveloped" and "savage" were only a few. This was soon adopted and developed by some esteemed schools of Anthropology. We see that in the vast corpus of literature, the term had a widespread use just as in politics.⁷ In political theory, a very crucial distinction was drawn between Europe and the rest of the world. For the non-state parts of the world, terms such as "uncivilized", "barbaric", and "despotic" were attributed to most of the pre-modern territories and peoples. Even though in Europe wars were codified and regulated,

⁷ After the 19th century, we see that the "barbarian" was connected to the idea of the "despotic east" and to the debates on "orientalism" -during the 20th cent. seeing the change of undeveloped - underdeveloped - developing is also interesting-

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beyond the borders they were fighting unconventionally (Mattern, 2002: 6). It is seen that towards the so called "barbarians", most of their acts were unregulated, easily justified, greedy and cunning beyond thoughts.⁸

In the 19th century's context, the term "barbarian" within the evolutionist discourse of Anthropology, was assigned as a name of a technically primitive stage. (see. Morgan, 1877: viii) No matter how technical the term "barbarian" used to be, any attempt to liberate it from its ethical, aesthetic, and political pejorative connotations now seems impossible. Its semantic load has already become 'the primary meaning' and the wicked associations of "the barbarian" have overtaken its initial meaning. Now it is no more an "ordinary other" like someone who can be negotiated with or worthy of a relationship of any kind, on the contrary it is "the evil" because it is "the barbarian" and the timeless enemy.⁹

⁸ We see the same approach in a recent paper by Grygiel. Although Grygiel claims that, his enrollment of the "barbarian, implies no moral judgment" but he ties up Huns, Mongols with the "present-day jihadist barbarians". This phrase shows the familiar discriminative presumptions are available in present day political literature. It is clear that for some, others are still standing on the same second stage of the world; first one is higher, elegant, has the tools (the language and all the media infrastructures with other tools) deciding who is good and who is evil (the "nomos" as the threshold of power and law connection), the second one is simple: inferior.

⁹ Even today in many texts from different disciplines, we see the same approach. No need to mention the strategy and politics of the "axis of evil" discourse of Bush administration, but a quite recent paper we may take as an example, Jakub Grygiel says, "The similarity between pre-modern barbarians and their contemporary counterparts lies in three key domains: the way they are organized, how they assault..., and the challenges they inherently pose to the states..." (Grygiel; 2007). Nevertheless, a year earlier warned us for this new-usage of "barbarian" was on the way. He says, "...The setting of distinctions, formulations of in/out, marks also the return of the enemy both internally as the disturber of peace and externally as the barbarian" (Grygiel, 2006)

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In this respect, studies on Chinese history in western languages recall a survey for the usage of Chinese terms. We need to keep in mind that there is an established presumption in scholars' minds for the Chinese terms of "yi", "di", "hu", "rong" and such which are somehow associated with "the barbarian". Although the Chinese terms have different meanings, due to this mismatch practice they had to inherit a heavily loaded legacy of abusive and discriminative approaches. Worst of all is that the ideas have been imposed virtually to different historical and geographical environments. To accept this approach, we need to overlook this political intention behind the Western scholar's mind. Following this argument, if we were to match the terms "yi-di-rong and hu" with "barbarian", we would still need to settle a similar basic dichotomy of *zoe-bios* term couple as in Aristotle's works. On the contrary, the fundamental conceptual duality and the most profound philosophical term couple in old China, the *yin-yang*, urges us to ask whether it had ever implied any discrimination on "human nature". Or was it merely the two phases of the same "nature" which is inherent to all beings in all realms of life, readily intact in Chinese (Huaxia) and foreign peoples' nature (Yidi and the others) both. To Chinese eyes were the neighboring foreigners really different by their nature?

There is another practice, habitually maintained by Western scholars, which couples Chinese terms with "barbarian". Instead of dealing with peculiar meanings, most of the scholars prefer the simplest way of putting original names together with "barbarian" as in "Yi barbarians" or "barbarian Rongs" etc. It is comprehensible to a certain extent and we may provide some autonomy to Chinese terms in this way. These term couples seem to be able to slightly distinguish themselves from the Europeans' "barbarian" at first sight. Obviously this

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kind of coupling was intentionally made for the ease of comprehension and designed for the sake of surpassing 'unnecessary discussions' on whether these terms were indeed equal matches for "barbarian" or not. Nevertheless, by doing so, many scholars also neglected the possible conceptual consequences in a long-term period. That is; the synthetic and syncretic matches of "yi/di/rong/ man/hu=barbarian" couples, eventually created their own irreversible *super-signs*. These *super-signs* are abundant now in almost every study on related subjects. Besides the usage of "barbarian" alone -with or without quotation marks freely-, phrases as "*yi-barbarians*", "*di-barbarians*" or "*barbarian rongs*" are also common. Needless to quote the intentions behind it any further; the simple aim in the beginning seems to be 'the alignment of Chinese terms with Western terminology', which looks quite harmless. But whatever the reason may be, addition of the term "barbarian" with its morphological and semantic strength, seems to have repressed the other part of the term couples in time. Thus the original meanings of the Chinese terms were forcibly reduced to a uniformed and pejorative idea, and the original connotations of the terms became unreachable for many people who cannot read related original texts in Chinese. As for common history-readers and even in many scholars' minds, these terms are equal to "barbarian" and the peoples mentioned with them are mere "barbarians" no matter who they used to be to Chinese eyes.

On matters related to Chinese history, we may also assume that in different countries, hundreds of scholars that cannot read Chinese occasionally refer to Western studies. This calls the question whether the discriminative terminology could stay within the scopes of English and French (etc.) speaking countries. The permanent usage of "barbarian" for neighboring

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people of China, has been transported to other places to be transplanted without consideration via translations. Therefore, with all its humble status and inferiority, "the barbarian" which is known from Ancient Greece and Rome reappears on East Asiaas if it is an original idea from China herself. Moreover, many scholars and common readers from different countries are unaware that such a semantic distortion exists. In Western studies the term "barbarian" is used so frequently and crudely that even if a sprout of doubt sprang in the reader's mind about the true contextual meaning, it would soon be repressed and constrained under the intensity of use.¹⁰

Conclusion

Some may assume that, "using 'barbarian' instead of 'foreigner' is just a language habit". This might be an excuse but is also the recognition of this fact at the same time. In this sense, ifthe meaning of a word in a language is bound to its usages, and the usages produce a value total, then accommoda-ting "barbarian" for this or that term, even though we disregard the expense of distortion in the signified word, it still leads to inevitable consequences in itself. The expansion of semantic area of "barbarian" brings new connotations. By transplanting the term "barbarian" to different languages, the original meaning becomes indistinct and loses its primary connections, contaminating Chinese terms in return.

¹⁰ See; Granet 1929; 6- 286, v.d.

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