

A Semiotic Reading of Nicholas Jose's *Avenue of Eternal Peace*¹

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Abstract

Nicholas Jose has been advocating “transcultural writing” for more than three decades, with *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (1989) as an early part of his practice. In 1990, *Avenue* was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Prize but failed to win this Australian national award. Judged by Chinese semiotician Zhao Yiheng’s reception model of narratives, this is a “message blocked” case. Using the framework of Roman Jakobson’s communication model, this paper reinterprets the six constitutive factors and functions to investigate the elements that blocked the message. My main argument is that “contact”, “context”, and “code” jointly blocked the communication; the three Cs reflect three long-standing problems in Australian literature: the issue of cultural identity, the dark side of White Australian Dream, and the Orientalist representation of “the other” culture. The failure in literary communication analyzed also suggests that Wally’s perception of China follows a Saussurean dichotomy which presupposes a closed linguistic system and excludes the role of the subject and the extra-semiotic object in signification. The Peircean trichotomy better captures the process of concept formation and is a better approach to transcultural writing in the contemporary postmodern situation. Transcultural writing challenges its readers; we need to transcend our confined nationality and persistent prejudice, and develop adequate “transnational literacy” to appreciate this new form of cultural production.

***Keywords:* Saussurean dichotomy, Peircean trichotomy, transcultural writing, Nicholas Jose, Avenue of Eternal Peace**

1. Introduction

Australian writer Nicholas Jose's connection with China started early in his childhood with a missionary great grandfather feeding him Chinese stories. Jose had five years of expatriation as a professor and cultural counsellor in China, which enabled him to observe China from within. He is now based in Adelaide but regards himself as a cosmopolitan, and lectures extensively in America, Europe, and China. Jose has published seven novels and two short story collections for which China has been an inexhaustible inspiration. Based on his expatriate experience, *Avenue of Eternal Peace* was Jose's first transcultural writing experiment. Its release in 1989 met the Western desire for peeping into "a house that is open" and received overwhelming positive comments. Margaret Jones thinks that "Jose has been able to probe deeper than most into the Chinese psyche" (Jose, 1989, book cover). Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman say that "Jose's sense of China is seen from the inside ... *Avenue of Eternal Peace* seems prophetic of many aspects of the current position of China in relation to Australia and the rest of the world..." (2009, pp. 125-126). *Avenue* was short-listed for the Miles Franklin Prize but failed to win. One of the judges, Colin Roderick says it was a novel about China and "was not eligible for the Miles Franklin Award", which must "present Australian life in any of its phases". Jose defends himself by saying that

one of the phases of Australian life is the attempt to translate. The process of translation, the journey of mind to make intelligible what we perceive at first to be only dimly part of our world, but which eventually becomes familiar and known, is what we are all about, one way or another, and is surely about all of us. (Jose, 1995, p. 43)

Transcultural writing is a method that Jose derives from translation to represent China and negotiate cultural difference. Jose holds that "[t]he best that one Australian writer's story can show is perhaps the encounter, the journey, the changes that China brings" (Jose, 1995, pp. 42-43). *Avenue of Eternal Peace* showcases Jose's textual strategies and thirty years of bilateral reception shows that the novel was not read as the writer had expected. It is ironic that a novel "questing for an Australian identity"²

was excluded from its national award; and a writer who despises Orientalism was criticized for his own Orientalist discourse. Such situational irony prompted this article to rethink the transnational production and circulation of Australian literature.

Figure 1. Jose's transcultural writing



This paper offers a semiotic reading of Nicholas Jose's novel *Avenue of Eternal Peace*. Before this textual analysis, it is necessary to explain how a semiotic approach works in transcultural writing. In his monograph *Semiotics*, Zhao Yiheng borrows the Greimasian semiotic square (see Figure 2) to show that there is a huge gray area between “the true” and “the false” in narratives which may lead to diversified reception results. In Zhao's semiotic square (see Figure 3), “S” signifies the “truth” of the message; “~S” signifies the “falsehood” of the message; S₁ signifies that the addresser is “being” sincere; S₂ signifies that the addressee seems to accept the message; ~S₁ signifies that the addresser is “not-being” sincere; ~S₂ signifies that the addressee does not accept the message. Taking “the intention of the addresser” and “the reliability of the text” into consideration, Zhao analyzes eight reception models with five successful reception results and three failed reception results³ (see Table 1) (Zhao, 2012, pp. 258-278). The three categories of failed reception include 3a) “fail to understand”, in which the addresser is sincere and the text is reliable, but the addressee fails to understand; 3b) “message blocked”, in which the addresser is sincere but the text is unreliable and the addressee will not accept; 3c) “ineffective deception”, in which the addresser is insincere and the text is reliable but the addressee is too smart to be deceived (2012, p. 276). If we see the writer as “the addresser” and the reader as “the addressee”, the reception of *Avenue* in the 1990 can be classified into category 3b, “message blocked”.

Figure 2. Greimas semiotic square

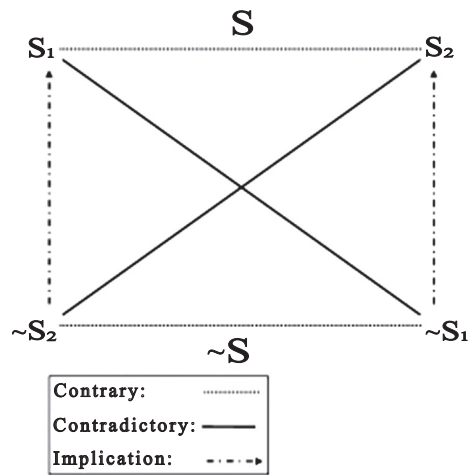


Figure 3. Zhao Yiheng’s semiotic square

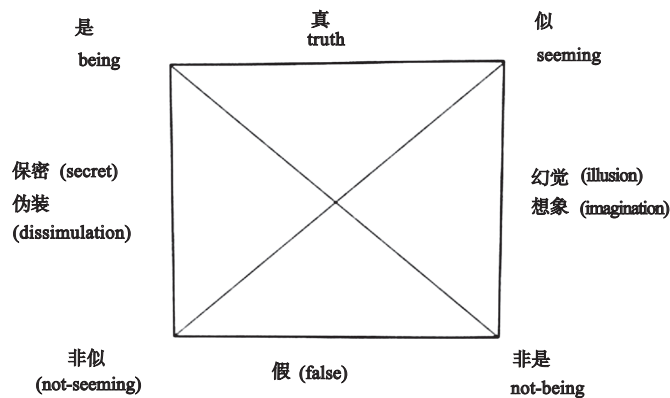
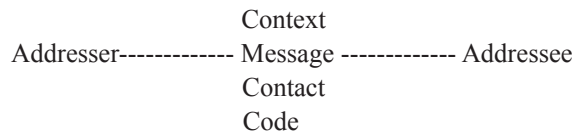


Table 1. Zhao Yiheng’s reception model

Category	Is the addresser sincere?	Is the message reliable?	Will the addressee accept?
1a. “intention understood”	Yes	Yes	Yes
1b. “succeed to deceive”	No	Yes	
2a. “ironic understanding”	Yes	No	
2b. “performing illusion”	No	No	
3a. “fail to understand”	Yes	Yes	No
3b. “message blocked”	Yes	No	
3c. “ineffective deception”	No	Yes	
4. “false drama”	No	No	Yes/No ⁴

To better understand this failure case in reception, this article turns to a very perceptive semiotician, Roman Jakobson, who points out that “a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 377). According to Jakobson’s model of communication (Figure 4), the ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative, the message requires a CONTEXT referred to; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee; and finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both to enter and stay in communication (Jakobson, 1960, pp. 353-357).

Figure 4. Roman Jakobson’s model of communication



In the ensuing parts, this paper reinterprets the six Jakobsonian constitutive factors and their linguistic functions in three pairs to explore the literary issues of subject voice, narrative situation and textual feature (see Table 2). As a protagonist and speaker for the writer in the novel, Wally Frith is chosen as **the addresser** in this analysis. **The addressee** is the Australian reading public and **the message** is Jose’s transcultural writing. The three Cs (contact, context, and code) in the verbal communication reflects three enduring problems in Australian transnational literature, namely the issue of cultural identity, the dark side of the white dream, and the Orientalist representation of the other culture. The author hopes that this case study can offer some illumination to the semiotic study of transnational literature.

Table 2. Factors and functions in *Avenue of Eternal Peace*

Factors in <i>Avenue of Eternal Peace</i>	Linguistic functions	Literary issues
Addresser: Wally Frith	expressive and phatic function	subject voice
Contact: Australian cultural identity		
Addressee: Australian reading public	conative and denotative function	narrative situation
Context: White Australian Dream		
Message: Transcultural writing as world literature	poetic and meta-lingual function	textual feature
Code: Orientalist representation		

2. Subject Voice: Cultural Identity in the Contact Zone

Jakobson explains that the so-called emotive or expressive function, which focuses on the addresser, aims at a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. The addresser of the narrative is usually not the author himself but a "fictionalized author". As Roland Barthes reminds us, "the one *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one who is" (Barthes, 1975, p. 261). Nicholas Jose's protagonist Wally Frith acts as "the one who speaks", the Australian subject voice. Jakobson's "contact" is a "channel" or "connection" between the addresser and the addressee. If we regard cultural representation as a social practice, the "contact" could be understood as the position of the addresser, or cultural identity to be specific. This section will start from an exploration of Wally Frith's family and educational background.

Wally was born into a working-class family at Wollongong in 1945. Family never meant much to him, but he shows great concern to its connection with China. The discovery of Father Jerry's birth certificate in Chinese arouses the boy's curiosity. His grandparents, Frith and Retta, had been missionaries in China for more than ten years. As a young boy, to visit "The Hut in the hills" Grandpa built in memory of Retta was a ritual pilgrimage for Wally. "The soil and climate made exotic things grow there", and "viewed from the bottom road the landscape arranged itself in descending terraces and framed The Hut with lofty trees, some European, some native, some oriental, shaded, half-hidden, with an illusion of great distance" (Jose, 1989, p. 29). The harmonious

integration of Eastern and Western elements in the landscape, the mysterious stories of China, and the glorious ancestral spirit left imperishable traces in Wally's memory.

As a young man, Wally was determined to be an explorer of whatever terrain the modern world laid open. Wally's educational background and early academic experience show a typical life of an elite Australian intellectual. He was an educational product of Sydney University, Cambridge, and Harvard. At Cambridge, Wally shaped and strengthened his socialist principles, but he also got a no-nonsense attitude from both of his parents. In May of 1968, while student activists were participating in demonstrations, Wally "was in the lab eighteen hours a day, refining his data on the oncogene" (Jose, 1989, pp. 41-42). Wally fell in love with a New Zealand girl, Bets, and they soon got married. After Cambridge, he took up a post-doctoral position at Harvard Medical School under the supervision of a Nobel laureate, Harvey Heimann. When his son was five years old, Wally was fed up with expatriation, and he decided to move back to Sydney. Wally was preoccupied with his work as a cancer specialist and an activist in the intellectual circle. His absence in family life made Bets lonely, which led to her poor health. Bets was diagnosed with cancer and died after a period of torturing treatment. The family loss as well as frustration in his career caused Wally to have a middle-age crisis. His supervisor offered him a Chinese scholar Xu Qianlong's paper on cancer treatment, which seemed to be a way out and led Wally to China for salvation. Wally arrived at Peking Union Medical College before the Chinese Spring Festival in 1986 and stayed there as a visiting scholar for one year.

Wally's China story begins with a sentence "The map makes no sense". The map was used for guidance, but without the language and culture, it made no sense. The Chinese way of life seemed disagreeable to Wally. In China, Wally had to splash "his face with icy water that was unfit to drink". The public places in Beijing were dirty and the terrible weather made non-locals sick; the people around were either dumb and indifferent or rude and unreliable. Wally used to have a busy schedule and an organized working life in Australia; but in China he found himself "at a loose end", which made him uncomfortable. He felt "cooped up, his curiosity mounting into restlessness, but at the College there was no one around; the rooms were empty and the doors were locked" (Jose, 1989, pp. 1-3).

Wally found Chinese social customs strange. Setting off firecrackers had been a longstanding custom to celebrate Chinese New Year, but to Wally it was “the sounds of military attack”. It was strange that “the people marked a new beginning by waging war on their besetting demons, firing heaven with the flame powder they had invented”. He did not enjoy this celebration and “was forced to close the door and curtains and insert his earplugs, to regain his world of order and shut his eyes for rest, as the crackers continued” (Jose, 1989, pp. 10-11). The Chinese civilities were nothing but hypocritical courtesy to him. He commented on Director Kang’s welcoming speech: “The words slipped down with as much oil as the stir-fried fish.” He responded tactically: “China has many secrets, and many of her secrets are the secrets of nature. Now China is opening, perhaps she will open nature to us in a new way and give us knowledge that so far eludes us.” After the speech, Wally reflected that “to talk in riddles was easier than to talk straight. The more his hosts smiled their assent, the more skeptical they probably were” (Jose, 1989, p. 13).

From his self-introduction and his experience encountering Chinese culture, Wally’s sense of belonging lies in the West. China “remains the object, not subject, of Orientalism, enclosed in that particular power structure of a ‘positional superiority’ that keeps the upper hand over China” (Ouyang, 2008, p. 37). Wally himself is tortured by such an attitude: “Why do we always end up talking of them as ‘the Chinese’, ‘they’, ‘them’, as if they’re different species. As individuals they’re as different from each other as chalk and cheese. But it’s the larger organism that fascinates us, the group thing, the nation, the race.” (Jose, 1989, p. 117) In his writing practice, Jose intended to take a transcending attitude and advocates a cosmopolitan identity, which may not be achieved in Wally’s generation, but there is hope in the next generation. In the novel, Wally’s son Jerome and Dr. Song’s 4-year-old daughter are both “citizens of the world”. However, this cosmopolitan identity or transcending attitude is also problematic. Wang Labao argues that:

“Transcending” cultural differences often do not mean giving up one’s prejudices and bias in favor of direct engagement, or a readiness to share all the different layers of another culture’s symbolic meanings, not just knowing it, understanding it but partaking of its

daily operations and learning to feel the same way about all different elements of another culture. But genuine transcultural writers should have, in addition to the right knowledge of and right attitude towards other cultures, a genuine sense of commitment and belonging in other cultures and they can actually engage and share and positively participate in the daily operations of another culture. (Wang, 2017, pp. 55-56)

Wang hopes that transcultural writers can actually engage and positively participate in the other culture, but in the 1980s, when Jose wrote Wally's story, he has not yet engaged himself in Chinese culture. The fact that Wally stayed at a distance from the other culture shows the contradiction between a cosmopolitan attitude and the process of cultural sedimentation. This contradiction between a utopian dream and cruel reality contributes to the blockage of the communication. We hope that Wally's followers can "positively participate" in and "heartily share" other cultures by taking up a responsibility for those cultures.

3. Narrative Situation: The Expectation of the Australian Reading Public

Jakobson's "context" is "the referential", the topic of the message. If we consider the "cognitive" function and the "conative" function together, the "addressee" in our case study is the expectation of the reading public, or the "narrative situation" in Barthes' words. To be more specific, it is the dominant social historical atmosphere—the bicentenary celebration to "quest for a national identity" in the late 1980s. This paper argues that *Avenue of Eternal Peace* is not a story about China, but an Australian novel in its own way. The theme of the novel is what Wally addressed to his fellow Australians.

As Jose reveals in his cultural essay, *Avenue* was inspired by Fan Kuan's painting "Travelers among Mountains and Streams" (see Figure 5). Fan Kuan illustrates his structure of the cosmos through his ink painting: the front view shows the bottom level of the secular world, which signifies the ordinary Chinese people who are busy working and cannot even look up and think about their status. The middle view is

a shaman climbing the mountain, which signifies Wally's journey to China. The distant view is an exceedingly high mountain, like the Tower of Babel, signifying the dominant will power or the highest authorities never to be challenged. From a distant view, one can see clearly a delicate spring, which signifies the source of law or the Tao. This philosophy echoes with a three-layered theme in the novel: an eyewitness observation of contemporary China, a spiritual journey of white Australians, and an exploration of the East-West relationship.

Figure 5. Fan Kuan: "Travelers among Mountains and Streams"



Wally's observation of China shows that Chinese modernization is a "not yet" achievement; its policy only benefits a few people. He takes his friend Eagle Lin's family as an example: "Life in Peking opened like a paper flower with changes in the economic policy, but still Mother Lin queued for rationed noodles, Old Lin had to beg for his medicines, when Sunshine called it was to scrounge spending money, and Eagle felt buried alive." (Jose, 1989, pp. 56-57) "The New Age" is just a tricky government propaganda. "There had always been a New Age, but nobody could say for sure whether it had passed or was to come. The phrase suggested infinite deferral." (Jose, 1989, p. 18) The New Age Bar as a contact zone witnessed the ugly illegal practices of corruption and smuggling. The barman Young Bi overheard a dialogue between Mr. Foreign Trader and Mr. Party Greenhorn, which showed a

huge gap in salary between the working class and the privileged class. Foreign Trader kept offering Westerners “Han bronzes, Sung porcelain, girls, boys, dope, heroin and excellent exchange rates”, and “Party Greenhorn [was shown as] developing a paunch and [sitting] in the dark with a white hand appearing from behind to rub his trouser front” (Jose, 1989, p. 133). The academic field was not a clean place either. After a careful study of Director Kang’s publications, Wally found that all the good bits in Kang come straight from Xu. Ralph who was angry at such a blatant act of plagiarism but Wally displayed a scholarly reluctance to jump to conclusions. He said that acts of plagiarism were often hard to distinguish from similarities in work emerging from different people within the same lab or institution. And he understood that originality and plagiarism had different meanings in China and outside (Jose, 1989, pp. 182-183). Jin Juan commented drily on plagiarism, “Proletarian appropriation applies also to intellectual property” (Jose, 1989, p. 216). When Wally intended to strive for Xu Qianlong’s justice, the victim himself said he didn’t care at all.

Wally’s exploration of East-West relationship is also depressing. The cross-cultural love affairs are metaphorical and one can detect fear and desire behind each love. Wally and Jin Juan were fond of each other, but both would hesitate to say this was true love. Jin Juan acted as the whore for revenge on her boyfriend, and Wally took Jin Juan as a replacement for Bets. Wally felt sad when Jin Juan refused to go back with him to Australia, but soon he realized that his quest for her “had been his quest for Bets, for a body to wear her shadow” (Jose, 1989, p. 291). It was Bets who had gone, and all of China could not take her place. Dulcia appreciated Jumble’s talent and understood that he would never realize his dream in China. She exhausted her power to help Jumble leave China. But the two did not trust each other and Dulcia was not what she said, “[who] doesn’t expect anything in return”. She gave Jumbo a copy of *The Joy of Sex* (Jose, 1989, p. 177). Jumble did not realize his dream as an artist; instead, he found the States unsuitable for him. Clarence showed his sympathy to Autumn at first but gradually he fell in love with the boy’s childlike innocence. Autumn felt gratitude to his “big brother” but he was clearheaded when he wrote: “We two have different nations, different languages, different backgrounds... We two must travel our separate roads.” (Jose, 1989, p. 273) He then cut his connection with his big brother and joined

the army. When a group of friends gathered in a small restaurant to see Wally off, a man at the next table who was not happy seeing Wally with Jin Juan ordered the boss:

“Throw the foreigner out; we don’t want foreigners with our women. We are China. My father was skewered to death trying to keep the little Japanese out of our town. My uncle joined the Red Army to throw off foreign oppression. My grandfather was a Boxer for the Emperor. Am I not a Chinese man? Kill the foreigners!” (Jose, 1989, p. 289)

The tone of the drunken man is full of blind nationalism and xenophobia. The failure in love repeated the Kiplingesque proposition that “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”.

In most cases, readership depends on the audience the writers choose. If the writer chooses to write in English, he is choosing a global audience of English speakers, including Chinese English speakers. Chinese readers will find Wally’s observation of China negatively commented and ideologically challenging. As Australian critic Bill Ashcroft says, “Trying to please both audiences may result in pleasing neither... The identity of the audience will also depend greatly on the publisher; on marketing capacity; and on production values.” (Ashcroft, 2008, p. 163) Jose’s consideration for his Australian readers is one possible reason for Wally’s negative comments. In 1988, Australian settlers celebrated their bicentenary anniversary and Australians were feverishly shaping their dream. However, China was not included in the dream. Instead, China operated as a sign to help Australians understand themselves, or even worse, as a threat to its “core” values. This dependency and defensiveness towards exogenous elements is depicted as “the dark side of the Australian dream” by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra. As we can see, the 1989 Miles Franklin Award went to Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, while the 1991 winner was David Malouf’s *The Great World*. These are what the readers expected—historical legends, especially stories on how white settlers interacted with the Australian environment. The global and local context in the era of bicentenary blocked channel of communication and excluded *Avenue*, a novel totally set in China, from the list of awards. No matter how hard the writer strives to cater to his readers, the message fails to work in them.

4. Textual Feature: Transcultural Writing as World Literature

Roland Barthes argues that “writing signifies that one is telling, thereby making the whole referent (‘what is being said’) contingent upon this illocutionary act” (Barthes, 1975, p. 263). Writing involves metalingual operations to articulate the “message”. Besides the theme discussed above, a more general “message” Jose intended to pass to his readers is that ‘transcultural writing’ about China is part of world literature. Both his definition of “transcultural writing” and his method of treating the other culture show his orientation to cultural affinity. The “code” here is the representation system of China. Unfortunately, the textual feature in *Avenue* shows that his representation fails to escape the Orientalist discourse.

China has appealed to the Western writers as “a realm for tall tales, fantasy, and the revelation of profound mysteries, a fabled zone of difference”. Jose thinks that the Australian writing about China should move beyond this realm and arrive at a level of unrestricted freedom in its approach to Chinese culture. “Translating China”, which he later defines as “transcultural writing” is a better way for Australian writers to follow. He regards George Johnston’s *The Far Road* (1962) as a good example because the real experience of China gave Johnston “a kind of freed vision, profoundly doubting, and the strength to look into nothingness” (Jose, 1995, p. 40). Postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin include literatures “by writers who are generally more affluent, more mobile than populations regarded as diasporic, who may feel ‘at home’ in several locations rather than ‘exiled’ from home and who spend time traveling, and even living in two or more locations” in their definition of transnational literature (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2000, p. 214). Jose’s definition of “transcultural writing” overlaps with Ashcroft’s “transnational literature”, but he favors transcultural affinity over postcolonial hostility. In a recent book chapter entitled “Transcultural Affinities”, Jose investigates historically the term “transcultural” and “transculturation” and makes a distinction between terms like “iner-cultural” and “cross-cultural” to clarify his definition of “transcultural writing”. The word was coined in the 1940s by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz (1978) in relation to Afro-Cuban culture. Ortiz proposed the term to replace the paired concepts of

acculturation and deculturation that described the transference of culture in a reductive fashion, one imagined from within the interests of the metropolises. Mary Louise Pratt defines “transculturation” as “a phenomenon of the contact zone”. The contact zone is a social space where “disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”; “Transcultural” is a better word than “inter-cultural” and “cross-cultural” because it “allows for imbalance, disparity, and transformation” (Jose, 2018, pp. 66-68).

National literature treats culture as “a rooted tree” or “a deep well”, but transcultural writing treats culture as “a fluid river”. Jose regards transcultural writing as “the survival fish” in the mixed water. East and West meet in the river “where fresh water and salt meet...only a special type of fish thrives, all the other fish die” (Jose, 2014, p. 8). Jose quotes Fay Zwicky’s poem to illustrate the significance of such Australian appropriation of Chinese culture:

Poems blow away like pollen,
Find distant destinations,
Can seed new songs in another language.

Real and symbolic, transient in its manifestations yet imaging eternity, landscape is central in Chinese art. Chinese landscape painting—and poetry—embodies not only relationships between human beings and the natural world, but also between artists, as cultivated spirits in the endless line of descent that is tradition. This way of conceiving landscape can answer to an Australian need. (Jose, 1995, p. 57)

Such an idea echoes with Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the “wasp and orchid” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. “Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome.” They do not imitate each other, but “a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp” (1987, p. 10). “Transcultural writing” is not a product of hybridization, but a “double-becoming”. *Avenue of Eternal Peace* has not come to

such a point of “double-becoming” yet, but we are happy to see that such “double-becoming” is achieved in his third China narrative *The Red Thread* (2000).

As Ding Ersu observes, “The past four hundred years of world history have been basically a story of Western military conquest and trade expansion. Given that, Orientalism offers an important perspective in cross-cultural studies, it forces us to re-examine the Western episteme towards the East” (Ding, 2011, p. 133). Wally takes up a position as “the West” and regards China as an inferior East. In the novel, we can easily find details implying the barbarian nature of the Chinese. When Wally was invited by his Chinese friend Eagle Lin to his home for dinner, Mother Lin mentioned rumors about dumplings of human flesh. She warned that Wally should not eat dumplings outside. Though Eagle was not comfortable about the topic, he did not deny the fact (Jose, 1989, p. 59). Here is another example showing that China is in desperate need of Western intervention. Xu Qianlong was deprived of his home in the Cultural Revolution and he got his home back with the help of his American friend. “It was Harvey Heilmann, who wrote letters to the Chinese authority and asked them to treat him fair.” The relics of the Summer Palace are proof of Western invasion in 1900, but Wally felt no guilt over what his ancestors had done. He commented on the Chinese architecture under Western influence in a mocking voice. “The Curling baroque stones looked like the playthings of a giant child abandoned in the grass. Removed from native soil, the eloquence of Rome was translated into swirling plastic pomposities of fantastic silliness.” (Jose, 1989, p. 175) However, he spoke highly of the changes that his missionary grandparents had brought to local people in China. After so many years, when Wally and Jin Juan revisited the town where his grandparents worked, people still remembered his grandparents and their good deeds. Wally felt rather proud of their pious religious belief and their heroic missionary deeds. Wally reflected that Eastern civilization is like the water in the pond of Xu Qianlong’s house: “without boundary or bottom or colour, [it] was a mysterious image of nothingness” (Jose, 1989, p. 218). In his imagination, Xu Qianlong’s wife turned out to be Peg, an apprentice of his grandma Retta. This discovery reassured him that true wisdom lay in the West.

The representation of China in *Avenue* follows many Orientalist frameworks,

which Alison Broinowski calls “Australia’s Far East Fallacy”, among which the Butterfly Phenomenon is typical (1992, p. 26). Broinowski observes that Australian representation of Asia shows an enduring appeal to Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* story. A generally accepted view of the Butterfly Phenomenon is that the “exotic, beautiful, and transient Butterfly is misled to believe that she can marry Pinkerton, leave Japan with their baby and become an American”. But Pinkerton thinks that “Eastern woman may be delightful, but she cannot become a Western wife” (Broinowski, 1992, pp. 119-120). A mysterious spy case in 1986 might have given Jose some inspiration for his Butterfly plot. A French diplomat Bernard was in love with Shi Peipu, a Peking Opera singer who played a female role. Bernard had been living with Shi Peipu for twenty years without knowing that he was a man. Spies, love, and cross dressing created a sensation in France and the whole Western world. In *Avenue of Eternal Peace*, Jin Juan disguised herself as her cousin Azalea, a Peking Opera Singer, and stole into Wally’s apartment. The two had a one-night affair, but Wally was confused who he had slept with. Later on, Wally analyzed his sexual intercourse with Jin Juan with an “enactment of a yin-yang fantasy”. The mysterious East played the part of female passivity and the determined West played the part of male activeness. The mysterious East surrendered to determined Western penetration, which was “a residue of his native Australian racism” (Jose, 1989, p. 210). Both the Butterfly plot and the metaphorical interpretation of the relationship show a strong Orientalist discourse. But his Orientalism is a bit different in that this “Butterfly” is an independent woman who refuses to go to Australia with her foreign boyfriend and this “Pinkerton” holds that Eastern woman can become a Western wife. Wally is sincere in proposing to his Chinese girlfriend. Jose sees Orientalism as “a way of finding something to love, to be ravished or amused or appalled by, in another culture, for finding inspiration there in things that are quite oblivious to the standards of the contemporary West—kitsch or sublime” (Jose, 1995, p. 70).

The Anglophone representation of “the other” forms Jose’s cultural baggage and helps his readers construct their image of China, and will reinforce the already established cultural codes. This literary legacy is so strong that if writers do not follow, they do not know how to articulate their voice. Such a representation system

is the dominant will power which functions as a firewall to safeguard an imperialistic cognitive system. A world literature sets its aim at cultural affinity, while the Orientalist discourse aims at difference. On the one side, the writer must follow the established norms and codes to achieve a metalingual function and keep the channel going; on the other, he is always questing for creativeness to realize a poetic function. Such a contradiction fails communication.

5. Conclusion

This paper offers a transnational perspective with a semiotic approach to the circulation and reception of Australian transcultural writing. It concludes that Wally's perception of China reveals a narcissistic Western subject and absolute alterity in the oriental object via an enduring orientalist discourse. The three Cs (contact, context, and code) jointly block verbal communication in transcultural writing. For the part of the addresser, Wally's cosmopolitan identity and the transcending perspective contradict the process of cultural sedimentation. For the part of the addressee, Australians are advocating a xenophobic white dream in the public mood of the bicentennial anniversary, and they are not ready to give up white superiority but act as a not-so-confident secondary West. For the part of the message, world literature is a way of reading for affinity, but Australian literature is so obsessed with a postcolonial perspective which focuses on difference.

Representation and signification are associated with the identity of the author, the public discourse, and the reader's response. The failure case analyzed above also suggests that Wally's perception of China follows a Saussurean dichotomy which presupposes a closed linguistic system and excludes the role of the subject and the extra-semiotic object in the signification process. The Peircean trichotomy better captures the process of concept formation and is a better approach to transcultural writing in the contemporary postmodern situation. Transcultural writing challenges its readers, but there is no right or wrong reading. What we really need is to transcend our confined nationality and persistent prejudice and develop adequate "transnational literacy" to appreciate this new form of cultural production.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented to 2017 ASAL conference in Melbourne and a revised version was delivered to 2018 Advanced Semiotics Workshop at Nanjing Normal University. The author feels gratitude to Professor Bill Ashcroft and Wenche Ommundsen, Professor Ding Ersu and my PhD supervisor Professor Wang Labao for their valuable advice. Without their help, this paper would not come to the present quality. The paper is the periodic fruit of my research project "Cultural Representation in Australian Postwar Fiction" (Grant Project Number: 2017SJB1222), funded by the Jiangsu Province Office of Education, and "A Study of Transcultural Narratives by Nicholas Jose", a Youth Program for Humanities and Social Sciences sponsored by the China Ministry of Education (Grant Project Number: 18YJC752048).
- 2 In the 1980s, a group of Australian writers chose to distance themselves from the Australian context and quest for an identity from elsewhere. C. J. Koch and Nicholas Jose are their representatives in Asian writing.
- 3 Professor Zhao Yiheng's *Semiotics* was written in Chinese. The reception model quoted here is the author's own translation.
- 4 In professor Zhao's illustration, category 4 is a bit complicated; it could be both a success and a failure in reception. If the reader knows that the writer is trying to deceive but he cannot help falling into resonance with the message, this could be a more desirable reception in artistic production.

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