

Analyzing the Perceptual Perspectives of 19th-Century Western Adventure Narratives Through the Lens of Human Geography: A Case Study of Northwest China

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Abstract: This paper examines the intellectual contributions of 19th and early 20th-century explorers to the understanding of Central Asia, focusing on their exploration of geographical, historical, and cultural landscapes. These explorations are framed not merely as colonial or imperial undertakings but as complex, multifaceted intellectual endeavors that resulted in the preservation and documentation of ancient civilizations and geographical knowledge. The paper also explores how these explorers' works continue to shape contemporary academic discourse, especially in the fields of archaeology, ethnography, and geography. Additionally, it reflects on the convergence of physical and digital realities in modern cross-cultural communication, drawing parallels between historical exploration and the role of transportation networks in fostering cultural exchange. The study concludes that the non-fiction intellectual works about Central Asia played a significant role in shaping global knowledge, offering invaluable insights into the region's historical and cultural significance, while the background remains being controversial.

Keywords: Central Asia, Exploration, Intellectual History, Cross-Cultural Exchange, Geographical Knowledge, Transportation Networks

1. INTRODUCTION

Media geography not only focuses on the role of various cultural and geographical environments in shaping media forms and content but also delves deeper into the specific ways in which "geographical samples" manifest within the media. In contemporary society, most people's understanding of geography primarily derives from media representations rather than direct experience or field research. Due to the barriers of geographical distance, the Western perceptions and imaginings of the East have largely been mediated through books. Although the ancient Greeks and Romans' conceptions of "Seres" and "Sinae/Sina" are far removed from the present, they subtly connect to contemporary Western impressions of China. The narrative records left by ancient Western writers provide us with numerous possibilities. The coincidences discovered in the research, or the mutual citations and speculations among the authors, form

a narrative that is both magnificent and full of asymmetric beauty. This leads us to consider that while modern historians are indeed expected to 'record the truth,' the ancients were never constrained by such theoretical frameworks and were free to embellish their narratives with fantastic imaginations. The "Seres" and "Sinae/Sina" we read today mostly do not appear in works that claim to be historical; instead, they are presented to us in the form of literary works. Tracing back to the 13th century, a period marked by the significant activity and profound influence of Western missionaries, this era witnessed a remarkable intensification of East-West exchanges. This article focuses on a selection of non-fiction works authored by Western scholars from Europe, which have played a pivotal role in shaping the Western conceptual framework of Xinjiang in China, majorly in late 19th and 20th Century. To gain an understanding of the border regions during this period, Eastern scholars, in addition to engaging with Chinese sources, would often consult these works for comparative analysis. The choice to focus on non-fiction texts is driven by two primary considerations: Firstly, in contrast to fiction works, non-fiction texts by Western scholars are typically regarded by audiences as more objective and authoritative sources of information. These works employ rigorous academic language, detailed historical data, and analytical methodologies to document research findings or present results. Consequently, they are more readily accepted by the public as objective facts, exerting profound and lasting influences on public cognition. Secondly, when discussing the modern northwest frontier regions of China, non-literary works by Western scholars have become the primary means for the Western world to gain insight into the area. The viewpoints and data they present have, to a large extent, shaped the Western understanding of Xinjiang. Furthermore, even within the modern Western academic circles that critique "Orientalism," these non-literary books continue to be researched and cited. The objective reality that exists is transformed into a subjectively constructed reality in the narrative (Mains et al., 2015). Media engages in a narrative and naming of geography that is filled with imagination. So, in the early stages of modern globalization, what kind of geographical world and spatial reality of the "Western Regions" (西域) do Western literary works construct as a form of media? Who is primarily involved in this construction? How is it constructed? What kinds of power relations govern this construction and imagination? How do different imaginaries use various social contexts, fields of action, resources, and communication strategies to converge and form a large-scale media project about a

particular place? These are the key questions the author seeks to address.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE TREND THROUGH EURASIAN EXPLORATION ROAD-MAPS

2.1 History of the Adventure Trend

With the rise of the Mongol Empire in 13th century and its westward campaigns, the transportation and communication across the Eurasian continent were greatly enhanced, offering unprecedented opportunities for missionaries and explorers to venture into the Far East. These missionaries and explorers, bearing the dual responsibilities of religious propagation and cultural exchange, enriched Western knowledge and imagination of the Far East through their firsthand experiences and observations, producing a wealth of literary works that profoundly expanded the Western understanding of the region (Hunt, 2019). Among the most renowned figures in this context is the Italian merchant and explorer, Marco Polo. Between 1271 and 1295, Polo embarked on a remarkable journey across Eurasia, beginning in Venice and traversing the trade routes known at the time as the "Silk Road." In his work, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (also referred to as *Book of the Marvels of the World*), he meticulously documented his experiences through Central Asia and Northwestern China. Historically, Northwestern China has been a region of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural integration, serving as a crucial artery of the northern route of the Silk Road. Polo's narrative offers vivid descriptions of his observations while crossing this vast and diverse land. His travel route and activities in China, particularly his interactions with the Yuan Dynasty's Emperor Kublai Khan, are thoroughly chronicled in *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Polo, 2022). The book was compiled in 1298 by Polo's fellow prisoner, Rustichello da Pisa, based on Polo's oral accounts, and was first published in Venice in 1324. It quickly became a sensation across Europe, emerging as one of the best-selling travel works of its time. In Marco Polo's writings, the Orient ceases to be a distant and enigmatic otherworld, transforming instead into an "ideal realm" brimming with wealth, wisdom, and civilization. This portrayal profoundly shaped European geographical understanding and cultural imagination, reconfiguring the Far East from an unattainable abstraction into a destination of curiosity and aspiration. The vast steppes of Central Asia, the oasis cities of Xinjiang (新疆), and the bustling grandeur of the Yuan Dynasty's capital, Dadu (大都), are imbued with vivid detail and profound cultural resonance in Polo's

accounts. These depictions not only offered contemporary Europeans a tangible vision of the Far East but also inspired boundless fascination and a fervent desire for exploration (Hsu, 2010). Over subsequent centuries, literary works such as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, with their distinctive narrative style and emotive expression, transcended temporal and spatial boundaries to continuously shape geographical perceptions and imaginations across diverse cultural contexts in the West. This construction of geographical imagination not only enriched the repository of geographical knowledge but, more importantly, facilitated the generation and dissemination of the cultural symbolism associated with spatial representations. It laid a robust foundation for future geographical exploration and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the widespread circulation of Polo's travelogue in Europe catalyzed the popularization of geographical knowledge and revolutionized prevailing conceptions of the world. It ignited an enduring enthusiasm for exploring the unknown, driving the expansion and renewal of geographical understanding. This influence served as a precursor to the surge of exploratory reports and literary works that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, leaving an indelible mark on the evolution of geographic and cultural thought. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, European countries, particularly Britain, experienced a surge of interest in the deep geographical exploration of Central Asia, with China's "Western Regions" (Xiyu) emerging as the central focus of these exploration efforts. The British Empire, taking advantage of its advantageous geographical position in India, sought to extend its influence into China's Xinjiang region, especially following the rebellion led by Yaqub Beg in the region. As early as 1834, Britain dispatched W. H. Wathen to study the region of Khotan, laying the groundwork for subsequent activities. Between 1865 and 1866, W. H. Johnson conducted a detailed survey of Khotan. In 1870, R. B. Shaw expanded his exploration to the Yarkand and Kashgar regions. By 1873, T. D. Forsyth and his team had completed an extensive survey of Kashgar and the surrounding Tarim Basin. British exploration continued unabated, with Carey and Dalgleish embarking on journeys to Xinjiang from 1886 to 1887, further deepening their exploration of the same regions. Notably, in 1889, Major Hamilton Bower, while pursuing the fugitive who had murdered Dalgleish, also arrived in the Xayar region, further expanding the British examination of Xinjiang (Raad, 2021). The Czarist Russia also showed a strong interest in China's Xinjiang region, frequently sending officials and scholars to conduct detailed explorations of the area. For example, N. M. Przhevalsky conducted thorough explorations of the Lop

Nur, Qem, and the oases around the Altyn Mountains from 1870 to 1885, making four separate trips. B. L. Grombecevsky systematically surveyed and excavated the western edge of the Tarim Basin. Between 1889 and 1890, M. V. Pevcov, Roborovskij, Bogdanovič, and P. K. Kozlov explored regions including Kashgar, the southern slopes of the Tianshan Mountains, and the upper reaches of the Yarkand River. During this period, the secretary of the Russian consulate in Kashgar, Ya. Ya. Ljuc, collected a large number of valuable ancient documents, which were later housed in the Hermitage Museum. Additionally, Belinko and G. Kolokolov, the Russian consul in Kashgar, donated their collections to the Russian Academy of Sciences' Anthropological and Ethnographic Museum. According to the minutes of the Russian Imperial Archaeological Society's Oriental Department meeting on November 28, 1891, a detailed outline for archaeological excavations and scientific research in the Kashgar region was prepared and sent to Petrovsky. Based on this, the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences and the Archaeological Society jointly dispatched an expedition led by D. A. Klementz in 1897 to conduct in-depth excavations in Turpan and the Tarim Basin (Gordon, 1876). It is worth noting that imperial Russian and later the Soviet union diplomats played a crucial role in the southern Xinjiang exploration activities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Stationed at key transportation hubs, they established extensive connections with European explorers who frequently passed through the region. Through these interactions, Russian diplomats not only gained access to the latest developments in southern Xinjiang's archaeological research but also gained in-depth knowledge of many important details in this field. Particularly notable was Sven Hedin, who, during his multiple expeditions to Xinjiang, regarded the Russian consulate as an essential supply station and a temporary storage for valuable artifacts. The collaboration between Russian diplomats and European explorers not only provided the necessary support for the exploration activities but also facilitated Russian diplomats' deep understanding of the dynamics in southern Xinjiang's archaeological research, laying a solid foundation for subsequent academic studies and historical exploration.

2.2 Representative Adventure Literature from late 19th Century

The British officer, explorer, and author Francis Edward Younghusband (also known as Rong Hepeng in Chinese), in his book *The Pamir Adventure*, meticulously records his exploration of the Pamir Plateau between 1884 and 1894. During this period, he crossed the Karakoram Pass multiple times. For instance, traveling from Hami to Kashgar, he followed the

northern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains, a route frequently taken by caravans. After crossing the Karakoram Mountains from Yarkand, he discovered the Argyle Mountain Range and the tributary Shakusganmu River of the Yarkand River, as well as the Salbur Lago Glacier to the north of the Karakoram's main peak. This journey marked him as the first European to gaze upon the northern slope of the Karakoram Mountains. The significance of Younghusband's expedition lies not just in the hardships and length of his journey, but in the fact that the region he explored was, at the time, still largely unknown to Europeans and shrouded in mystery. He succeeded in unveiling the mysteries of the East, particularly the enigmatic Pamir Plateau, to the Western world. From a modern perspective, his journey—from the Changbai Mountains(长白山), passing through Beijing, crossing vast deserts and Gobi, and eventually traversing the Karakoram Mountains back into India—can be retraced with the help of television, movies, photos, and the internet, allowing us to "gaze" at the grandeur of deserts, "appreciate" the landscapes of mountains, lakes, glaciers, passes, and plains. Today, we can also "observe" the beauty of grasslands, the majesty of mountains, the vastness of plains, and the endlessness of deserts. Yet, through Younghusband's travel memoir, we can not only follow the author's footsteps and experience the thrill of his adventure but also glimpse the unique customs and landscapes of the Western Regions more than a century ago. In his book, Younghusband deeply discusses his personal views on travel, emphasizing that the true value of a journey lies not just in geographic exploration, but in its power to greatly expand our cognitive horizons and imaginative spaces.

"Then, in the present, what is happening in these worlds around us? When I visited the secluded little state of Hunza, whose inhabitants were shut out by the mountains from contact with outside peoples and countries, I found they thought that the world only consisted of a few neighbouring valleys, and that no higher race than themselves existed. They could form no conception of such vast plains of cultivated land as are seen in India; they could imagine nothing like the ocean; a railway and a telegraph would have seemed supernatural to them, and men who could invent and work such things as of an altogether superior order to themselves. We men on this earth are in as remote a corner of the universe as Hunza is in this world; among the millions of worlds around us, there must be living beings of some sort, and, among them all, may there not, perhaps, be some who are superior to ourselves?" (Younghusband, 1896).

At the same time, Younghusband also recorded many intriguing

anecdotes during his expedition, one of which is particularly captivating: a series of amusing misunderstandings arose from slight pronunciation differences during his communication with a Mongolian guide. What is especially noteworthy is that the bridge of communication between them was actually Chinese. This choice of language not only transcended regional and cultural boundaries but also added an unexpected and delightful dimension to their interactions.

“During this march my Chinese rather came to grief. I had been walking, and wanted to ride, so I said to the guide, ‘Yau chi’ (‘Want to ride’). The guide was eating some bread, and laughed at me, shaking his head. I got rather angry at this, and repeated, ‘Yau chi,’ at which he shook his head again and pointed to my camel. My boy now shouted out to him, and he then at once dismounted and seated my camel for me. It then struck me that ‘chi’ also means ‘to eat,’” and he had thought I meant I wanted some of his bread, and had pointed to my saddle-bags, where I had my own. I ought to have said ‘Yau chi’ in a surprised tone, whereas (not being in my usual amiable state of mind) I had said it in an angry tone, and the meaning was immediately altered from ‘I want to ride’ to ‘I want to eat’.

Such are some of the intricacies of the Chinese language. Moreover, this passage was omitted in the new 2013 edition, for reasons that remain unknown. At the same time, George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925), a prominent British politician, diplomat, scholar, and writer, became well-known for his profound understanding of the British Empire's Eastern affairs and his extensive travels in Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among his numerous academic contributions, his 1896 work *The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus* stands out as another exemplary fusion of literature and geography. This work is not only a geographically valuable academic text but also a remarkable account that deeply influenced people's geographical knowledge and perceptions of transportation. Based on Curzon's firsthand exploration and research in Central Asia, the book meticulously describes the geographical features and natural ecology of the Pamir Plateau, as well as the source and watershed of the important Amu Darya river system. The book not only showcases the natural beauty of these regions but also delves into the historical and cultural contexts behind them, providing valuable geographical, historical, and cultural material for the academic world. At the same time, this work holds indispensable academic and historical significance for understanding the political situation, economic exchanges, and cultural integration in Central Asia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his 1896 report, Curzon, with his keen insight and delicate prose, vividly depicted the

magnificent landscapes he encountered on his journey across the Pamir Plateau. His writing is not just an objective record of natural scenery; it is a profound shaping of geographical understanding and transportation imagination. Through these descriptions, readers can almost transcend the boundaries of time and space, experiencing the adventurous journey filled with challenges and unknowns. For example, in the book, he writes:

“There is, further, a certain gradation of landscape-impression, in the northward march from Kashmir to the Pamirs, that is not without an instructive as well as an esthetic significance. On the earlier parts of the road to Gilgit, the traveller rides through the shade of pine forests and skirts romantic glens. Soon he passes into a region where there are neither trees nor flowers, where the mountains exhibit only a sterile and forbidding gradient, and where across the bald summits of the passes the snow-laden gales shriek a sentence of death to animal and man. The Indus valley, with its brown and verdureless rocks, enclosing the Tartarean trough in which the inky volume of the great river rolls by, accentuates the mournful impression. Then in the Hunza valley, which is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable scenes in the world, Nature seems to exert her supremest energy, and in one chord to exhaust almost every note in her vast and majestic diapason of sound. She shows herself in the same moment tender and savage, radiant and appalling, the relentless spirit that hovers above the ice-towers, and the gentle patroness of the field and orchard, the tutelary deity of the haunts of men” (Curzon, 1896).

Curzon, through his vivid prose, presents the magnificent grandeur of the Pamir Plateau, the timeless flow of the Amu Darya, and the desolate yet vibrant landscapes along the way. He is not merely a transmitter of geographical information, but a shaper of geographical perception and transportation imagination. This mode of presentation not only stimulates curiosity and longing for unknown regions but also profoundly influences people’s geographical understanding and imagination of transportation in that area. In Curzon’s narrative, the Pamir Plateau is no longer a mysterious and unreachable place; it becomes a living, vibrant natural wonder. His descriptions make people realize that, although these regions may be distant and challenging, they are equally rich in natural resources and cultural heritage. Furthermore, Curzon’s documentary work offers a new imagination of “movement.” By depicting what travelers see along their journey, he frames travel not only as a physical means of relocation but also as a process of aesthetic perception and spiritual encounter. His descriptions of different spaces and places not only enrich people’s travel experiences but also promote sensory communication between the peoples

of different regions and cultures. Another prominent figure of this period was the British explorer Sir Aurel Stein, whose extensive explorations began in 1900 when he set out from Kashmir to undertake a thorough investigation of China's southern Xinjiang region. His travels spanned across Xinjiang and the Pamir Plateau, leaving behind an invaluable trove of geographical, historical, and cultural records. Stein meticulously examined ancient texts, contributing critical insights into the locations and historical significance of places such as Niya, Keriya, Endere and Lop-nor, majorly credited to the Tang-Seng's travelling book "*The Monk of the Tang Dynasty*" (Stein, 1904). Throughout his journey, he provided detailed accounts of the natural geographical features encountered as he traversed the Pamir Plateau into Xinjiang, including the diverse characteristics of the terrain and the routes' physical attributes. His descriptions of the vast and unbounded Taklamakan Desert stand out, where he documented the varying distributions of rivers, lakes, and vegetation. Notably, Stein emphasized the historical and geographical importance of the oases along the route, underscoring the significance of ancient ruins within these regions. He observed the natural variability of the routes, noting that while the western paths from Khotan were relatively stable, those to the east, beyond the Keriya River, were subject to frequent fluctuations. These insights highlighted the crucial role of river systems, particularly the Keriya River, in facilitating the ancient Silk Road's passage across the desert. Stein also observed the climatic diversity of southern Xinjiang, meticulously recording data on temperature, precipitation, and wind conditions across different seasons and locations. These observations provided invaluable resources for subsequent climate research. Beyond natural geography, Stein conducted an in-depth examination of the region's human geography. He vividly described the lifestyles, religious practices, and cultural traditions of local residents in the areas he traversed, offering a richly detailed portrait of a vibrant and distinctive local society. For instance, Stein documented his encounter with "Raja" Ajab Khan, the local king, during his journey through Hunza settlement. He observed and recorded the language variety and how locals communicate. Notably, Stein highlighted the ruler's progressive focus on locals using Turki and Persian, Wakhi, Hindustani to communicate in different occasions. According to Stein, "*At Khudabad, a hamlet of eight house, my day's march ended. Here I passed once more out of the Wakhi area into that of small Hunza settlements. The fact reminds me of the strange variety of tongues which at that time could be heard in my camp*". Additionally, Stein noted the commercial prosperity of southern Xinjiang. He observed that cities

such as Kashgar served as hubs of international trade, attracting merchants from India, Afghanistan, and northern regions, underscoring southern Xinjiang's pivotal role along the Silk Road. Stein's expeditions were not merely a direct documentation of the region's geography, history, and culture but also a means of disseminating and exchanging this information. Through his publications and research findings, Stein brought global attention to the geographical features, human landscapes, and historical and cultural richness of southern Xinjiang. Moreover, Stein's explorations reflected the dynamics of spatial interaction and resource exchange. During his investigations in the Hunza and Gilgit regions, he engaged deeply with local residents, studying their languages and cultural traditions while forming his assessments. His observations provided valuable insights for British considerations regarding transportation routes traversing the Pamir Plateau. As Stein remarked, "*On the first expedition in 1900 my route from Kashmir to Chinese territory lay through Gilgit and Hunza, the latter a mountain tract offering the grandest scenery. Since a good mule track was engineered in the late eighties to Gilgit for the sake of maintaining there a small garrison of Imperial Service troops, and since the hill chiefships of Hunza and Nagar were by 1891 brought under effective British control, those valley shave become fairly well known*" (Stein & Mirsky, 1964).

As a prominent figure in the early 20th-century fields of exploration and geography, Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer, geographer, and archaeologist, made discoveries that have left an indelible mark on Chinese history, particularly with his excavation of the ancient city of Loulan in 1900. His works, including *Through Asia*, *History of the Expedition in Asia*, 1927-1935, and *My Life as an Explorer*, contributed invaluable information to academic circles regarding the Xinjiang frontier of China and Central Asia. Moreover, these writings painted a vivid picture of the distant and mysterious borderlands in the Western imagination. In *Through Asia*, recording his exploring between 1893-1897, Hedin meticulously chronicled the thrilling and perilous journey through the Taklamakan Desert and his exploration of the Lop Nur basin. His narratives not only showcased the magnificent natural landscapes of the Xinjiang frontier—such as the boundless expanse of the desert and the enigmatic depths of the lake—but also delved into the unique survival strategies and rich cultural traditions of the local peoples. Hedin's detailed descriptions served as a window into a world both unfamiliar and captivating for Western readers, challenging the previously held notions of these borderlands as desolate and backward, and sparking a newfound interest and curiosity about the region. Furthermore, in this work, Hedin vividly depicted the awe-inspiring grandeur of the Tianshan Mountains and

the tranquil flow of the Syr Darya, while also exploring the region's complex historical evolution and ethnic relationships. Through Hedin's writings, Central Asia ceased to be a vague, distant concept, transforming instead into a vibrant and storied region, teeming with history and life. In *History of the Expedition in Asia, 1927-1935*, Hedin provides a detailed account of his interactions with local peoples, vividly depicting the customs, festivals, and daily life of ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs and Kazakhs. These nuanced descriptions enabled Western readers to bridge the cultural and geographical divide, offering them a profound insight into the diversity and unique charm of Xinjiang's frontier cultures. Such portrayals deepened their understanding and respect for the distinctiveness of other cultures. In *My Life as an Explorer*, Hedin reflects on his extensive exchanges with local scholars and underscores the historical significance of Central Asia as a crossroads of ancient civilizations. His memory about Kashgar is vivid and intriguing. These recollections not only further enriched Western audiences' understanding of the region's historical and cultural heritage, but also sparked considerable interest in topics such as Silk Road trade and cultural exchanges. As a result, Hedin's writings played a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and the blending of Eastern and Western perspectives.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF IMAGINED GEORGRAPHY

3.1 Serving the Purpose

As evidenced above, since the early 19th century, Central Asia, with its vast and untamed landscape, became an alluring focal point for many explorers, drawn by the twin forces of colonial expansion and the insatiable human desire for discovery. These explorers, propelled by a yearning to uncover the unknown, embarked on extensive expeditions across this enigmatic region. Their journeys were often fraught with peril, but they yielded a wealth of invaluable geographical, historical, and cultural insights. Through their efforts, numerous significant sites and artifacts, long obscured by time and the harsh environment, were brought into the light. For instance, the ancient Loulan city—once lost to history—was rediscovered, its secrets revealing important clues about the ancient Silk Road. The Niya site, with its treasure trove of relics, once again illuminated the rich cultural exchange that flourished in this region over centuries. Additionally, the historical value of the Li Bo manuscripts and the artistic splendor of Western Region Buddhist murals and sculptures were

rediscovered, shedding light on the deep-rooted cultural and religious practices that once thrived in this area. However, while these explorers shared the same historical and political background, their differing academic expertise, personal backgrounds, and the particular focus of their missions significantly shaped the way they perceived and interpreted Central Asia. As Stein recalled “*The exceptional help which the Indian Government, inspired by Lord Curzon's generous interest in the history and antiquities of the East, had accorded to me, for a time removed the difficulties against which I had struggled, and brought the longed-for opportunity within my reach*” Each explorer brought a unique lens through which they viewed the region's landscapes, peoples, and history. For example, British explorer George Nathaniel Curzon, with his profound academic grounding and vast travel experience, focused on the geopolitical and historical significance of the Pamirs, emphasizing their strategic position within the broader context of Central Asia. His meticulous observations offered valuable insights into the intricate political dynamics of the region, particularly its role in the Great Game between imperial powers. In contrast, Francis Edward Younghusband, with his more adventurous spirit and practical approach to exploration, chronicled not only the geographical features of the region but also the cultural practices and landscapes he encountered. His narratives, imbued with a sense of discovery and awe, provided a vivid picture of the natural beauty and cultural richness of the Pamirs and the Karakoram, which had remained largely unknown to the Western world until then. Younghusband's journey, particularly through the mountainous passes of the Karakoram, contributed greatly to the Western understanding of the geopolitical importance of these areas. Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, another key figure of this period, had an almost scientific approach to his explorations. His systematic investigations into the geography, flora, fauna, and human settlements of the Taklamakan Desert and the Pamir Plateau revealed the intricacies of the natural environment and the adaptability of the people who lived there. Hedin's detailed surveys of the desert's hydrology, the role of oases, and the interrelations between human settlements and their environment offered new insights into the ancient trade routes and the complex web of cultural exchanges that sustained life in one of the most arid regions on earth. Meanwhile, the British archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein, known for his groundbreaking work in Central Asia, combined his expertise in archaeology and ancient manuscripts to unearth valuable historical texts and artifacts along the ancient Silk Road. His meticulous excavations in the ruins of Turpan, Dunhuang, and the surrounding regions revealed a wealth of Buddhist and

pre-Buddhist materials that helped scholars piece together the religious and cultural history of the region. Stein's work was pivotal in understanding the influence of early trade routes in the spread of ideas, religions, and art across the vast expanse of Central Asia. It is worth noting that despite the common political and colonial motives underlying their expeditions, these explorers' personal biases, academic training, and specific interests profoundly influenced their interpretations of the region. Even when encountering the same natural or cultural phenomena, their conclusions often diverged, providing a nuanced and multifaceted view of Central Asia. This diversity of perspectives has enriched our understanding of the region and allowed for a more comprehensive appreciation of its complex historical, cultural, and geographical tapestry.

3.2 The Shadow of "Orientalism"

The concept of "Orientalism" refers to a particular cognitive framework and cultural imagination through which the West perceives the East, often portraying it as a mysterious, backward, and urgently in need of salvation. However, with the advancement of scholarly research and the flourishing of multiculturalism, an increasing number of scholars have begun to reflect upon and critique this singular framework of understanding. Despite the fact that the authors of non-literary works were, to varying degrees, influenced by the temporal constraints and biases of "Orientalism," these works, when compared to other literary texts, stand out due to their rigorous academic approach and reliance on objective data. They not only provide a rich historical and cultural context but also, through logical reasoning and data analysis, offer a relatively objective basis and support for understanding the social realities of the time. It is important to note the significant distinction between geography as a concept of natural entities and geography as a conceptual construct within human cognition. As Edward Said, a foundational figure in postcolonial theory, pointed out, Western perceptions of the East are often saturated with rich imagination and subjective constructs rather than being solely based on objective facts. Said remarked, "*The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences* (Said, 2016)." Over time, the Western world developed a stereotypical geographical misreading of the East. Building on the West's long-standing distortion and misinterpretation of the Orient, Said developed his "postcolonial theory," asserting that the traditional concept of the "Orient" was disappearing day by day; in a certain sense, it has already disappeared, its time has passed. However, the author contends that

there is no definitive end to this phenomenon; rather, scholars have begun to re-examine these literary works from a critical perspective. This enduring misinterpretation is not confined to the West's view of the East, but extends to the East's perception of the West, the East's internal dynamics, and even between different factions within any given country. Sardar, for instance, criticizes the Trinidadian and Tobagonian author V. S. Naipaul, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2001, for seizing every opportunity to portray Islam through the traditional lens of Orientalism. Sardar observes, *"In Naipaul's modern world, everything is categorized into two clearly defined divisions: secularism is good, while Islam and anything associated with it is bad. [...] If the world is divided into black and white, it is not surprising that Naipaul cannot understand why educated individuals in the West would 'convert' to Islam. Why are there so many Muslims in the science and engineering departments of our universities? For Naipaul, these issues are too complex to comprehend, and thus he follows a selective path of ignorance: ridicule"*.

3.3 Imagined Geography.

When we rely on media, particularly news outlets influenced by various power structures and Western perspectives, to understand different geographies and places, misinterpretations are inevitable. Each individual seeks to carve out a unique landscape of understanding. While literary writing and geographical writing often draw upon each other and consider readers' expectations, they each possess distinct conventions, rooted in two divergent epistemological systems: one based on fiction and the other on the pursuit of truth. Literary writing reflects sophistication, whereas geographical writing embodies imagination. Although literary works are sometimes regarded as geographical texts that can yield valuable geographical information, and historical narratives are occasionally appreciated as fine literary works that provide aesthetic enjoyment, there remains a significant distinction between the geography crafted by literary writers and that described by geographers. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize this distinction when representing geography through media or attempting to comprehend geography via media. In essence, our understanding of geography and even the concept of the nation-state has always been mediated through descriptions provided by various forms of media—be it literary, journalistic, or visual. Most of our geographical notions are media-constructed, forming what can be described as a *"virtual entity"*. Benedict Anderson, in his renowned work *Imagined Communities*, described the nation-state—characterized by defined boundaries and

sovereignty—as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). He explained that the emergence of this concept was significantly influenced by two key cultural forms that originated in 18th-century Europe: the novel and the newspaper. These mediums, according to Anderson, offered the technological framework necessary to "re-present" the nation as a shared imagined community.

Mass media serves as the intermediary for this process of imagination, creating a shared "*ritual*" and experience of reading that enables millions of strangers to perceive themselves as part of the same community, thus constructing an "*imagined geography*." The media's portrayal of geographical samples aligns with Anthony Giddens' concept of the "created environment." Giddens explains that modern capitalism is characterized by the commodification of time, particularly as labor time, which, alongside the transformation of spatial dynamics, establishes a unique "created environment." This environment reflects new institutional structures that reshape the integration of societies and systems, fundamentally altering how the near and distant are interconnected in terms of time and space (Giddens, 1984). The influence of natural geographical distance on human affairs has significantly diminished. Mass media has blurred the boundaries of physical space, compressing and creating an unfathomable world. Global space is characterized by interconnected flows, forming an electronic, decentralized realm where traditional borders and boundaries have become increasingly porous. In this globalized setting, economies and cultures are brought into close and immediate interaction, engaging not only with external 'Others' but also with those integrated within their own spaces (Morley & Robins, 1995).

4. CONCLUSION

In examining the exploration of Central Asia during this period, it is crucial to recognize that these endeavors should not be viewed merely as manifestations of capitalist colonial expansion or imperial curiosity. Instead, they reflect the complexity and multifaceted nature of exploration itself. These explorers were not just agents of empire; they were also individuals deeply engaged in the intellectual pursuit of knowledge, cultural exchange, and scientific discovery. Their activities contributed not only to the expansion of geographical knowledge but also to the discovery and preservation of ancient civilizations that would otherwise have been lost to history. Furthermore, the cross-cultural interactions that took place during

these explorations led to the exchange of ideas, technologies, and artistic traditions. The intellectual legacies of these explorers, particularly in the fields of archaeology, geography, and ethnography, continue to shape contemporary research on Central Asia. Their writings, rich in both scientific detail and narrative storytelling, sparked Western interest in the region and fueled ongoing academic inquiry into the region's ancient history and cultural heritage. Furthermore, in the rapidly evolving landscape of new media technologies, the integration of traditional and new media has become an indispensable component of cross-cultural communication. The prevailing media trends today are characterized by the interdependence and convergence of physical and virtual realities, giving rise to new "spatial interfaces" (Doulis et al., 2009). Michel Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' is particularly apt for describing the nature of these digital narrative spaces. Heterotopia refers to unique sites where physical dimensions are intertwined with specific ideologies, visions, and life trajectories.

In the digital age, these 'heterotopias' manifest in new forms, such as virtual spaces within cyberspace. With the miniaturization and integration of digital technologies, overlapping spaces have become portable, enabling almost ubiquitous access through smartphones. This further blurs the boundaries between physical and virtual realities, making 'translocality' and 'hybrid multilocality' both feasible and prevalent. In this context, drawing inspiration from 19th-20th century nonfiction works, it becomes crucial to view transportation routes and its narrative literatures as bridges connecting nations across borders. These roads inherently possess advantages for cross-cultural communication, providing a foundation upon which a comprehensive communication network can be built, combining online media with offline tourism and people-to-people communication. Such an approach facilitates deep cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations. In conclusion, the exploration of Central Asia in the 19th and early 20th centuries was not merely an imperial project, but rather a complex and multifaceted intellectual endeavor that has had a lasting impact on the study of the region. These explorers' contributions to our understanding of the geography, history, and cultures of Central Asia are indispensable, offering invaluable insights into the region's role in world history. Their works, brimming with both empirical data and evocative descriptions, continue to serve as vital resources for scholars and enthusiasts alike, fueling ongoing research and deepening our understanding of this pivotal part of the world.

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