

ALEXANDRA DAVID NEEL: *A UNIQUE ORIENTALIST*

He Ningshan

Shaanxi Normal University

Nanjing Audit University

Abstract: Alexandra David Neel(1868-1969), a French writer and Orientalist, had traveled throughout Asia for many years and published vast travel writings of her reflections on Tibet. This paper, by tracing the trajectory of her Oriental Studies, highlights her role and significance as a unique Orientalist. It briefly reviews her experience in the East, analyzes the drives that propelled the pursuit of her east excursion, and evaluates her contribution in the dissemination of the Orient knowledge to Europe through her rich and influential writings as an “on-the-spot” observer and participant. Immersing in the Asian societies, she was a unique Orientalist who demonstrated profound interests that surpassed the superficial curiosity as “the Other”, and who promoted Europeans’ understanding of Tibetan cultures in the encountering of the West and East.

Key-words: Alexandra David Neel, Travel Writings, Oriental Studies, Tibet

I. Introduction

Alexandra David Neel(1868-1969) was a French female explorer who had achieved the exclusive feat of the first European woman venturing into the holy city of Lhasa. In the 1930s, Europeans were so greatly captivated by her travel

writings which vividly describe her expeditions to exotic Tibet that she was even honored as a “heroine”.

The centenarian took her roles in turn as singer, journalist, feminist, anarchist, Buddhist, and most impressive of all, a prolific travelling writer. It was in 1924 that the 55-year old woman, in the camouflage of a wandering mendicant pilgrim with inked skin, accompanied by her adopted son, the Sikkimese Lama Aphur Yongden, stealthily traversed through densely forested terrain in the roughest climate and the most unreachable highland in the world, and successfully reached Lhasa. Her travelogues in Tibet had won her such huge fame that her recounting of *Voyage d'une parisienne à Lhassa* (My Journey to Lhasa) about this treacherous and exhausting expedition is considered one of the most compelling travelogues ever written in French.

However, she was merely regarded as a popular travel writer, which is only one of her multiple identities. Her vast amount of writings can fall into different categories: reports from the great travel, popularization works of Buddhist, Tantric and Taoists, novels with plots placed within the framework of her exploration towards exotic civilizations, and the correspondence with her husband that served basically to the travel “diary”¹. Europeans were overwhelmed by her thrilling descriptions of the exotic Tibet while the values as books and articles about Orientalism were neglected. Her writings, as a matter of fact, reflect discourses about Orientalism and colonialism, and integrate with the discussion about the historical context and the cultural milieu in which she had lived. However, her name does not appear in any dictionaries or bibliographic catalogs of Orientalism. In fact, she is an illuminating example both as an intrepid travel writer and a scholar of Oriental Studies. Therefore, to highlight her role as an Orientalist is of significance to remedy the deficiency in research on her.

¹ Duccini H. *La «gloire médiatique» d'Alexandra David Neel*]. *Le Temps des médias*, 2007 (1): 130-141.

II. David Neel's Aspiration for Travelling (Better to use Alexandra Neel in this paper as David Neel sounds like a male name. David is her last name before marriage.)

David Neel is a woman “on-the-go”, who spent most of her life travelling in Asia. To explain why she chose to pursue Oriental Studies there, one must trace back to her early years of life in France.

1. Displacement of “Home”

It is said that a great feat usually germinates from a wound and is a response to an inner necessity. This truth applies well to David Neel's life story. The sense of displacement of the home had been haunting her since a young age. She was an unexpected daughter of her parents, born in Saint-Mandé, France on 24 October 1868. Her father, Louis David, didn't want children at all, while her mother, a fervent Catholic, longed to bear a son who would one day miraculously rise to the ranks of Church.

In her retrospective writings about her childhood home, David Neel seemed to be particularly obsessed by the absence of spiritual and intellectual ties between her parents and herself, uneasy and suffocated in the stifling atmosphere of her home. Her constant disagreement with and rebellion against her mother's bourgeois values gave rise to her alienation from the family. Being ignored made her strong-willed and aspiring for a life of freedom and adventure. One indication of this was her first flit from home at the age of five². When 15, she ran away again and, though failing from short of money, she made her bold attempt of reaching the port of Vlissingen in the Netherlands to try and embark for England. Her early years of repetitive escapades were preludes to the later long expedition to the East—living abroad for forty years, about thirty of which were spent in Asia.

2. Estrangement from European World

If David Neel believed that her soul was not bourgeois, she also felt deeply that it was not even French. She had explicitly expressed her estrangement from the Western world: “I delightedly forgot Western lands, that I belonged to them, and that they would probably take me again in the clutches of their sorrowful

² Rice, Earle. *Alexandra David Neel: Explorer at the Roof of the World* [M]. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.

civilization”³. She wanted to be away from continental Europe, which then was becoming increasingly nationalistic, less politically stable, and more controlling of women, particularly in France under the Napoleonic Civil Code⁴.

Therefore, in her innermost heart, there were a sense of displacement of “Home”, alienation from family and homeland, and it finally developed into a perpetual pursuit of her “Oriental Root”, a conviction that her lifelong mission was to trace her “distant Eastern lineage”. She described a reawakening of her Asian sense of ego just as she was starting to reach the acme of her goal, geographically and culturally, toward assimilating within her Tibetan surroundings. In her narrative description of finally arriving at the end of her pilgrimage to Lhasa, David Neel proclaimed that she felt “as if I had come home.....”⁵. Furthermore, while insisting upon the utmost importance of her incognito to succeed in her goal of attaining the forbidden city of Lhasa and the Dalai Lama’s palace, she described how her Tibetan “disguise” actually makes her feel closer to her roots: “I am one of the Genghis Khan race who, by mistake and perhaps for her sins, was born in the Occident”⁶. As her narrative explained, she felt misplaced in the west and discontent in “civilized” places; it was her deeply instilled a desire for a more profound sense of place that pulled her eastward. She confessed helplessness, or a homesickness for a foreign land, which she attributed in part to a distant Mongol ancestry through her mother: “I can’t tear myself away from Tibet”, she admitted. “I’m chained, nailed. I can’t help it.” She was determined, to an extent of obstinacy, liable to act on impulse and prone to bouts of depression.

III. Oriental Studies in Europe

1. The Encounter of West and East

The second half of the 19th century when David Neel grew up in was in drastic and frequent fluctuations, but it was also an Era when there was an initiation of exponential increase in human civilization. One hundred years before

³ Alexandra David Neel . *My Journey to Lhasa: The Personal Story of the Only Western Woman Who Succeeded in Entering the Forbidden City*[M]. Perennial, 2004..P61

⁴ Edwards, Natalie, and Christopher Hogarth, eds. *Gender and Displacement: "Home" in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography*[M]. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. . 108–34.

⁵ Alexandra David Neel . *My Journey to Lhasa: The Personal Story of the Only Western Woman Who Succeeded in Entering the Forbidden City*[M]. Perennial, 2004..

⁶ Alexandra David Neel . *My Journey to Lhasa: The Personal Story of the Only Western Woman Who Succeeded in Entering the Forbidden City*[M]. Perennial, 2004..

her birth, Europe accelerated its global colonization, with its eastward exploration and aggression promoting the emergence of “Oriental Studies” as a discipline.

The encounter between East and West turned out to be a gradual and complex panorama, and its origin could be traced back as early as the time of Greece. However, except for a few ancient Greeks as Herodotus(希罗多德) and Aristotle(亚里士多德), Europeans had not much knowledge of or interests in the cultures of Asia, even though Herodotus recounted his peregrinations to West Asia in *The History*, while in *The Politics* Aristotle initiated his concerns on Persian Monarchy⁷. Centuries between the 13th and 18th witnessed such attempts of West-East encounters as the Medieval Crusades’ eastward exploration and the Ottoman Empire’s transcontinental conquest. For centuries, merchants, pilgrims and adventurers had shuttled along the path crossing Asia to the ports of the Mediterranean, so in 1877 German geographer and explorer Baron von Richthofen⁸ coined the term “Silk Road(s)”. In the 13th century, Marco Polo and William of Rubruck(鲁布鲁克)⁹ contributed greatly to the description of a mythical and wonderful East. Two hundred years later, the overseas expansion had ignited Europe’s thirst for knowledge about the East and the hopes of seeking myths and Utopias. Throughout the period from 1500 to 1800, one of the results of the Protestant Reformation in England was that it stimulated a religious revival in the Counter-Reformation that led Catholic missionaries to dominate the Christian mission in China to compensate for losses to Protestantism in Europe, who became leaders in world missions and dominated the Christian mission in China for 300 years¹⁰. Even though at that time, Europeans’ Oriental attitude was almost an entirely self-righteous rejection. Instances of this were Buddhism, the core of Oriental Studies at that time, generally being condemned as heathen idolatry, while Christianity was a supreme religion¹¹.

⁷ Wang Ruliang 王汝良. *Dongfangxue Yanjiu Shuping (Review and Reflection on Oriental Studies)* [J]. Chinese Social Science Evaluation, 2016 (4): 55-65.

⁸ Waugh, Daniel. *Richthofen's "Silk Roads": Toward the Archaeology of a Concept*[J]. *The Silk Road* 2007(5):4

⁹ William of Rubruck (1248 – 1255) was a Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer. He is best known for his travels to various parts of the Middle East and Central Asia in the 13th century, including the Mongol Empire. His account of his travels is one of the masterpieces of medieval geographical literature, comparable to those of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta.

¹⁰ Mungello D E. *The great encounter of China and the West, 1500–1800*[M]. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

¹¹ Batchelor S. *The awakening of the West: The encounter of Buddhism and Western culture*[M]. Echo Point Books & Media, LLC, 2021.