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When the **FAR EAST** Becomes the **NEAR WEST**

By Kylan Rutherford



In 1978 Edward Said coined the term “Orientalism”

to describe the Western world’s habit of misrepresenting and patronizing cultures in the Eastern world. For centuries, Western empires have construed the East as a mystifying world of adventure, seduction, and abundant treasure; explorers and colonizers would come back with tall tales of palace courts and jungle tribes. The East was sexy. It was also—and often still is—perceived as inferior to the West.

A lingering bias is still prominent in how we learn about the East. For example, a high school student can take advanced placement courses in US and European history, but no Asian history option exists. A student is 57 times more likely to learn a foreign language from Europe than from Asia, and more than twice as likely to learn Latin, a dead language, than any Asian language. This Western focus doesn’t add up—Asia represents almost two-thirds of the world population and a third of global GDP. China is our number 1 trading partner. Asia’s margin over other regions is growing in almost every category. It matters.

As globalization brings the East and the West closer together, the ability to engage in business effectively in or with Asian countries is becoming almost mandatory. In 2012 The New York Times reported that almost 30% of non-Asian multinational companies had at least one of their board members living and working in Asia. Chinese, Korean, and Japanese individuals and companies represent some of the most promising investors for budding companies. Continuing to overlook countries in the Asia region is a choice that Americans make at their own loss.

Unfortunately, one can’t just “learn Asia.” The region has an astounding diversity of languages, religions, cultures, and politics. Approaching business in Asia as if it were a homogenous region would be akin to a Japanese corporation expecting the same business experiences in Montreal, Mexico, and Minnesota. However, the rising generation of business hopefuls looking toward Asia can invest now in some areas of skill still sought after in Asian countries.

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SKILLS IN DEMAND

30 years ago, basic skills that Americans possessed were in high demand throughout Asia. Now, countries like China, Japan, and the Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) have become developed and are saturated with these professionals. They are also well-equipped to generate revenue without a dependence on American companies. However, there are several things that Americans can still bring to the table.

Matthew Hosford, who has worked in the Hong Kong financial sector for almost 20 years and recently joined the World Bank, asserts that, “people like to hire Americans because they work well in groups and have an ability to analyze and come up with solutions.” Hosford encourages those wishing to do business in Asia to develop strong communication and writing skills, critical thinking, and genuine knack for analysis. “Not what the finance majors think,” he says, “but really understanding a situation from many angles.”

Many other doors can be opened if individuals develop what Hosford calls, “a sense of adventure and flexibility.” Other countries in the region are at the beginning of the same explosion of economic growth from which the developed Asian countries have just emerged. They are still underdeveloped, which requires some adjustment for professionals who move there to work and carries risk for those who invest, but these countries have astounding potential.

COUNTRIES TO WATCH

China is the cover story of Asia, but it is not the only place Americans should be watching. The Asian Tigers are stunning examples of how small regions have taken advantage of skills, position, and niche markets to jump into the top tier of world economies.

Hosford encourages anyone with an eye toward the future to watch Papua New Guinea, East Timor, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Many of these

countries could still be considered undeveloped or underdeveloped, but recent events are beginning to spark growth. Myanmar, for example, has only begun opening itself up to global markets in the past 15 years. It has a young workforce hungry for opportunity, it is wedged advantageously between India and China, and has phenomenal access to the Indian Ocean with a long coastline and decent system of rivers. Other countries on Hosford's watch list are similarly poised for future growth.

CULTURE TO UNDERSTAND

Very little can be generalized about the cultures of Asian countries; they have diverse pasts, religious traditions, geography, and politics. Their cultures underpin the commercial sector in the same powerful, yet subtle way Judeo-Christian values permeate the West. Thus, engaging with a country requires at very least an effort to understand the culture and a recognition that one's own culture is not universal.

America has an extremely individualistic society. Commenting on the #metoo movement, but referencing our culture as a whole, a scholar in Hong Kong said, "Americans take whatever they do and turn it into a show." Often the way Americans approach problem solving involves a level of recognition and publicity. Influence in Asia (speaking for many but not all of the countries) is often obtained quietly and discreetly. In a business meeting in China, for example, the most influential person in the room may say nothing.

Americans also need to get over our fear of Communism and Socialism. China is thriving under a communist regime. As America steps into the background of the international community, many nations—especially developing ones—are looking to China and socialism as a model for growth. Globalization has irrevocably planted principles of capitalism in the world markets, but China is proof that socialism and capitalism are not mutually exclusive. Individuals hoping to brave the international business world need to be conscious of these dynamics.

In addition to defining and fighting orientalism, Edward Said had this to say about understanding other cultures: "Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction." America is in a critical stage of change in its international roles. The world has shifted away from the dated Cold-War binaries and surface-level, orientalist understandings of the East. The rising generation in America has the potential to connect with the international world in unprecedented ways, but for that to happen we have some homework to do.

The online version of this article includes a list of online, periodical, and print resources that can provide valuable information on the current events and histories of various Asian countries. If you would like to "hit the books" and keep learning, please visit: www.marriottstudentreview.org.

Notes

ⁱ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

ⁱⁱ Wassener, Bettina. "Companies Shift Top Offices to Asia, Seeking to Crack Markets." *The New York Times* June 20, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Hosford (Chief Risk Officer in the Asia-Pacific region, Banco Santander) in discussion with the author, February 2018.

^{iv} Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 2003) p. xxii.

Map image created by Layerace - Freepik.com



Mandarin character meaning
"to combine into one" or "to unite"

*"The other half of the world knows an awful lot about us—and knowledge is power. The rising generation in America has the potential to connect with the international world in unprecedented ways, but for that to happen we have some homework to do. We need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow."
— Edward Said*