Universals in Intercultural Perception

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Each of the papers in this volume is concerned with how one culture perceives or responds to another, either at a popular or a scholarly level. When these papers are taken together, what general results emerge?

Doubtless many general results can be found, but I propose to call attention to three which seem to me to stand out with particular clarity and evidence. Two are of a philosophic character and one relates to popular perception.

The first emerges from the papers on scholarly perception and concerns the possibility of objectivity in the study of one culture by another. The papers themselves present a sharp division on this point, and what emerges from them therefore is the existence of two essentially different possibilities for the study of intercultural perception. These possibilities are particularizations of general possibilities which obtain in all regions of inquiry, and thus have a universal or philosophic character. The possibilities are incompatible in any given inquiry, but both are viable and may complement each other.

The second result emerges from the papers on popular perception, and concerns the pervasive influence on the popular perception of one culture by another of the narcissistic need of each culture to see itself as superior to the other.

The third result emerges from the papers which distinguish various responses by non-Western cultures to the hegemony of the West. It reveals the existence of two alternative ways of conceiving cultural interactions, and it is again of a philosophic character insofar as these alternatives correspond to general possibilities obtaining in all regions of inquiry.

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1. Scholarship: culture-free or culture-bound?

Scholarship, although it is a particular manifestation of certain cultures in a particular historical epoch, nevertheless seeks and claims objective and therefore universal validity for its results—"the ethos of scholarly pretension," as Kaori Kitao has put it. If such pretensions are justified, then the cultural provenance of the scholar will be irrelevant to his results. The possibility of a cosmopolitan scholarly community in which the object to be known controls the results of all inquirers is developed in three of the papers.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas's account of scholarship on the Middle East is of particular interest in this context because the Middle East today has the distinction of being the area with respect to which the objectivity of Western scholarship is most actively challenged. Malti-Douglas meets this challenge by conceiving scholarship as a community in which the inevitable prejudices, biases, and particular perspectives of scholars are balanced by the criticism and the differing prejudices, biases, and perspectives of other scholars. It is accordingly important to distinguish the criticism through which such balancing occurs from the condemnation which precludes it. Criticism, according to Malti-Douglas, takes place within the scholarly tradition of both the critic and the person criticized and should lead to positive results and profitable scholarly interchange. Condemnation, on the other hand, rejects the entire tradition and appears not to leave open the possibility of auto-criticism and self-correction. Malti-Douglas's own paper provides an excellent example of criticism as she conceives it, for it brings into the arena of scholarly discussion even the claims of those who condemn Western scholarship. And the increasing visibility of the opponents of "Orientalism" in the West does not mean, according to her, that the gap between Western scholarship on the Middle East and Middle Easterners' is increasing, but rather the opposite. It is evidence that scholarship on the Middle East is being increasingly carried on within a single scholarly community, not properly "Western" at all, but including Middle Easterners who may in fact occupy key positions in Western institutions. She even ventures to say that the subject of her study is about to self-destruct, since it will become increasingly impossible to speak of "Western scholarship" except in the genetic sense. In sum, then, the universality of scholarship is on this view insured through mutual criticism within the community of scholars.

Harold Z. Schiffrin in his study of scholarship on the Far East finds the danger to cosmopolitan scholarship in this area not in the blanket rejection of Western scholarship but rather in the oppressive political regimes which deny freedom and independence of thought to their own scholars. Such political restraint is found in late pre-war and wartime Japan and in post-1949 China. Except for such periods of political restraint, Schiffrin finds that East Asian studies have been dominated by the Chinese and Japanese themselves. There are differences in style, emphases, and nuances between Eastern and Western scholarship, but Schiffrin finds no total East-West confrontation, but rather shared differences on both sides. He also points out, analogously to Malti-

Douglas, that scholars of Japanese and Chinese descent fill essential teaching and research roles in Western institutions. Here again, then, differences of cultural background do not constitute an obstacle to a truly international scholarship. "In evaluating a scholarly work, why," Schiffrin asks, "should one be concerned with the ethnic or geographic provenance of its author?"

Carl Steenstrup, finally, is another friend of cosmopolitan scholarship, but the obstacle to it on which he focuses is neither the total rejection of the scholarship of the other, nor oppressive political regimes, but distorting biases in the Western scholar himself. He provides us with an assortment of seven such biases together with their respective remedies. The remedy for a distorting ethnocentrism he finds in a thorough knowledge of one's own culture, its historical roots, and its unique features. The fact that remedies for all of Steenstrup's biases are desirable and possible indicates that they do not entail a necessary relativism of scholarship to its cultural source, but Steenstrup does hold that there are in fact structural connections between the perception and study of Far Eastern societies and the basic institutions and characteristics of the culture from which the scholar hails.

These authors propose, then, three sorts of conditions as essential to the objectivity of scholarship: mutual criticism, freedom from political control, and a thorough knowledge of one's own cultural roots.

Let us now turn to the opposite possibility, that of treating intercultural perception as revelatory of the perceiver as well as the object. This possibility was pursued at the conference from which this volume originated in two fascinating case studies, one by David Kopf and the other by T. Kaori Kitao. It has not been possible to include Kitao's paper in this volume, but I will summarize it briefly. That both papers are case studies accords with the view that there are no objects common to different perceivers that could serve as a basis for generalization.

For David Kopf, truly objective scholarship is impossible and the definition of his subject, Shakto-Tantrism, is relative to the scholar who defines it. What he does is to correlate seven different interpretations of Shakto-Tantrism with the historical and cultural background of the interpeter. Three principal contrasting interpretations may be mentioned. The early Orientalists contrasted a golden age which was Indo-Aryan, classical, Brahmanical, and elitist, with a dark age which was medieval, popular or tribal, orgiastic, and corrupt. John Woodroffe in the decade of World War I defended the right-hand path of Shakto-Tantrism by removing the much maligned Shakto-Tantric tradition from its orgiastic setting, elevating the ritual spirituality by transforming fish, meat, wine, and sex into sublimated and symbolic attributes of a higher meaning, and building a philosophic structure out of Brahmanic sacred tradition to win orthodox approval. After World War II the once disreputable vamacari or left-hand side of Shakto-Tantrism became idealized, romanticized, eroticized, aestheticized and even philosophized as an Eastern counterpart of contemporary Western ideologies of sexual liberation. Put bluntly, says Kopf, for two hundred years Western scholars have gone through the motions of their craft, authenticating Hindu texts, translating them, making pedantic observations about their meaning, being pompous in the best professional manner, but were in fact, only responding strongly to

varying contemporary Western images of pornography or erotica as applied to Shakto-Tantrism, in particular, or Hinduism, in general.

T. Kaori Kitao contrasts the perception of Japanese architecture by Bruno Taut and others who approached it from the background of the International Style with its perception by the Japanese themselves. Taut saw the Katsura Palace as the most perfectly Japanese architecture in Japan, the perfect embodiment of the truly Japanese spirit, whereas Japanese historians of architecture had devoted relatively little space to this building or the Shoin style which it exemplified. What impressed Taut most was what he saw as the astounding modernity of design—the simplicity, the modular logic, the structural economy, and the flexible open plan. Kitao contrasts these characteristics with the components of Japanese architecture she sees as peculiarly Japanese: the raised floor covered with *tatami*, the enormous roof with its deep overhanging eaves, the verandahs under the eaves, and the sliding panels or *shoji* which serve as wall partitions. All of these, she argues, are accommodations to the climate of Japan. These two perceptions of the same object, or two readings or translations of the same text, as we say in a period when all things have become texts for us to interpret, are not, according to Kitao, mutually exclusive nor do they simply identify complementary characteristics in the object, but rather reveal the way in which perception depends on the perceiver, or what Kitao calls "distortion," perhaps an infelicitous word since it can be taken to imply that there is such a thing as a true or undistorted perception. She proposes that in examining cross-cultural observations distortions can be more informative of the respective cultures than the substance of the information, especially if the contrasting views are carefully correlated with each other. The ethos of scholarly pretension with its demand for analysis and objectivity endeavors to avoid all distortion, but the way in which scholarship followed Taut's lead illustrate, for Kitao, the hollowness of the pretension, and one might say that scholarship is one way of distorting the object.

Let us briefly pursue the relation between the approach which aims at objectivity in the study of cultures and the approach which denies its possibility. The pursuer of objectivity need not be non-plussed by the examples of Kopf and Kitao, but could obviously study objectively in these cases the dependence of the perception on the perceiver. But this, for the other approach, would again produce a result dependent on the perceiver, and the series can go on without limit. The two approaches are characterized by the relation I have termed reciprocal priority, for each can always undercut the other and incorporate its results. The facts can therefore never prove one right and the other wrong. A proposition asserting or denying the possibility of objective knowledge is an undecidable proposition, an undecidable proposition which has, however, like all the undecidable propositions of philosophy, the peculiar character that one cannot abstain from being guided by one alternative or the other if one is to do anything at all. Hence the inevitable and well-known pluralism of philosophic views, and the corresponding pluralism of approaches in the sciences. This pluralism, it may be added, is a true cross-cultural universal.

2. Popular perceptions and narcissistic needs

Popular perceptions are not controlled by the scholarly interest in truth, but by a variety of interests in the perceiver. One might say that they fall in the domain of the pleasure-principle rather than that of the reality-principle. But the pleasures the populace derives from the perception of another culture are primarily the narcissistic ones resulting from the enhancement of its own self-esteem, and so the controlling interest here tends to be in confirming the superiority of one's own culture. Superiority of course is relative to the values of the culture itself, so that the happy situation results in which all can publically acknowledge that everyone thinks his own culture superior, while each privately remains convinced that his own culture is *really* superior.

Scholarship too is relative to the interests of the scholar if objectivity is impossible, as we have seen. But the narcissistic interests of the scholar in his subject are in a way opposite to those of the popular perceiver, for the scholar becomes identified with his subject and is therefore disposed to magnify its value and importance. As Steenstrup points out, "If one spends years in studying, say, the Mohist Canon or the Book of Changes, one is apt to get some sense out of them, 'sense' being understood, subconsciously, as 'almost as good as what the Greeks did.' " We may note a happy situation which results when the narcissistic interests of the scholar coincide with the narcissistic interests of the culture he is studying. Dennis Hudson tells us that G. U. Pope in the preface to his translation and study of the *Tiruvacakam*, a crucial text in the Dravida Veda, says, "Saivism is the real religion of the South of India, and of North Ceylon; and the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy has, and deserves to have, far more influence than any other." The Tamils responded to Pope's work by putting up a statue of him on Marina Beach in Madras along with their other culture heroes. The response to praise that is perceived as self-serving or unrealistic, however, may be quite different, as we see from Schiffrin's account of the Japanese response to Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One*.

Turning now to the various modes in which cultural narcissism manifests itself in distorted perception, we may note first that the illusion of one's own cultural superiority may be maintained by seeing the other culture as having nothing to offer. Bernard Lewis, in a paper on Muslim perceptions of the West presented at the conference but not included in this volume, points out the remarkable indifference of Muslims to the West. He suggests that while Islam was expanding and receptive, Western Europe in fact had little or nothing to offer the Muslims, and was moreover discredited in advance by its profession of Christianity, an earlier and imperfect form of the revelation which the Muslim possessed in its final and perfect form. Later, when Christendom had more to offer, Islam was crystallized in its ways of thought and behavior and had become impervious to external stimuli. Masked by the still imposing might of the Ottoman Empire, the peoples of Islam continued to cherish the conviction of the immeasurable and immutable superiority of their own civilization to all others.

André Miquel in his account of Islamic views of India and China emphasizes

that the Muslim reports of Indian and Chinese society are never dissociated from a reference to the Muslim world, either implicit or explicit. The useful and the marvelous figure prominently in these reports, and the usefulness is to the Muslims, and the marvelous (besides reflecting a universal tendency of the human mind and the particular tendencies of sailors, among whom many of the stories originated) served to emphasize the distance between Islam and other countries: "Blessed be God who preserved us from such deviations." The reports of laws and customs similarly make explicit or implicit comparisons with the Muslims, as when the Indian Ballaharâ is compared to the Caliph of Baghdad or the Chinese administrative system to the Abbāsid political organization. The Indian doctrine of approach to the divine through transmigration is compared to the pagan Arabs who say they adore idols because in this way they get closer to God. The same sort of self-reference is also apparent in the Muslim accounts of the West reported by Bernard Lewis, as Evliya Çelebi compares the Austrians and Hungarians with each other by evaluating both against the Muslims. In such cases one can usually discern a combination of the natural tendency to apprehend the unknown in terms of the known and the tendency to perceive oneself as superior to the other.

Among the most unrealistic perceptions of one culture by another are those of the Middle East by Americans between the World Wars, as reported by L. Carl Brown. Brown notes that Americans after 1918 could have developed a sense of identity with the Middle East as people rightly seeking self-determination and as victims of European imperialism, or they could on the other hand perceive the Middle East through European eyes as "lesser breeds without the law." They chose the latter, according to Brown, because to do otherwise would have subtly and subconsciously challenged the comfortable American self-perception of its civilizing fight against the savage Indian and its paternalistic stewardship of the childlike Black. And when the American image of the Middle East did begin to change in the direction of greater realism, it was, according to Brown, more nearly a projection of certain themes and values from America's own self-image than a response to outside developments.

The American popular image of the Middle East as the great age of the movies began was, Brown tells us, that of a strange never-never land where things that happened had little or no impact on what Americans saw as the "real world." The Middle East was an exotic realm largely beyond history and politics. Early films, notably *The Sheik* (1921) and *Beau Geste* (1926), took advantage of this image for their own artistic purposes, using the desert as a background for exotic romance or as a fate or challenge which tests the European protagonists, breaking some while proving the worth of others. Brown notes in the 40s and 50s a tendency to use the Middle East simply as a convenient alien background, as in *Casablanca* (1942), and in the 60s, a tendency toward greater realism, as in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Khartoum* (1966). The standards of excellence in a fictional film are of course not those of truth and scholarship, and questions of historical truth may have little bearing on artistic merit. Brown notes the irony of French voices singing "La Marseillaise" in order to drown out the German voices singing "Die Wacht am Rhein," both national groups being on alien soil and

blithely ignoring the mute claims to independence and identity of their reluctant Moroccan hosts. This is an excellent point in Brown's context, but when he says that the film and its critics have totally missed it, it should be observed that this irony has no place in the emotional integrity of the film as a work of art. Nevertheless, truth, or, failing this, agreement with popular opinion, contributes to the ends of art, and as popular perceptions of a culture become more realistic, so do artistic representations of it. Films, however, tend in this respect to be conservative, reflecting and "canonizing" prevailing opinions rather than introducing new or truer ones.

The Chinese sense of their own superiority is clearly reflected in their perception of the Muslims, traced by Morris Rossabi over a period of 1200 years, from the late 7th and early 8th centuries, when the Muslims first started to arrive in China, to the present day. A central feature of the history is the way in which the Muslims resident in China have been influential in shaping popular attitudes toward the Muslims. Throughout the period there is the expectation, always disappointed but never abandoned, that the Muslims, impressed by Chinese superiority, will become sinicized. Rossabi tells us that in the pre-Yüan period, the Confucian elite was confident that the Muslims would be so impressed by Chinese civilization that they would gradually assimilate. For the Ming court, the ultimate goal remained the sinicization of the Muslims, yet it was sorely disappointed in its hopes for gradual assimilation. The Ch'ing found likewise that, contrary to its expectations, the Muslims had not assimilated. In the 20th century, the Nationalists did not admit that their ultimate goal was sinicization, but the implication seems to be that it still was. The Communists' ultimate goal for the Muslims still appears to be sinicization, says Rossabi, and Chinese today are reported as believing that the Muslims will assimilate. This persistent expectation is perhaps the Chinese counterpart to the Muslim confidence in the superiority of Islam.

The popular Chinese stereotype of the Muslim also shows a remarkable persistence. When the Mongol rulers of the Yüan dynasty (1279-1368) used the Muslims as intermediary officials between themselves and the Chinese, and also encouraged Muslim merchants to trade in China, the Chinese, according to Rossabi, began to develop an image of the Muslims as avaricious, unprincipled, corruptible, miserly, and manipulative. Under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the Muslim merchants were seen as shrewd, conniving, not to be trusted, avaricious to the point of deception and fraud, and hypocritical in the sense of ignoring religious beliefs if they interfered with commercial gain. The Muslims responded to Chinese expansion and colonization under the Ch'ing (1644-1912) with resistance, rioting, and rebellion, and this added a cruel, evil nature to the stereotype. But the other features remain the same: they are profiteering, insincere, not to be trusted, greedy, crafty to the point of dishonesty, and practice their faith only when it suits them. Finally, some recent visitors to China have reported, according to Rossabi, that the Chinese they have met have negative images of the Muslims. They state, with glee, that religious Muslims sometimes do not abide by the dictates of their faith. Rossabi thinks that political and economic considerations have shaped the Chinese view of the Muslims, but the facts he relates

suggest that here too there are enduring narcissistic needs sustaining over the centuries the illusion that the Muslims will assimilate and the stereotype of their moral inferiority.

Finally, the narcissistic needs influencing the acceptance of the results of alien scholarship are well presented by Dennis Hudson in his study of the response of the Tamils to their study by Westerners. As long as missionary scholars worked within a European culture viewed as unclean by Hindu Brahmans and Vellalas, and as long as their study of Tamil culture was intended to eliminate crucial aspects of that culture, Hindus reacted by affirming Dharma. But when their work supported the aspirations of the Tamils toward an independent identity it was accepted, and three Christian missionaries were accorded the honor of statues on Marina Beach in Madras as people important in the history of Tamil culture. Constanzo Beschi wrote Tamil grammars and a dictionary, and also an epic poem on the life of St. Joseph. G. U. Pope's translation has already been mentioned. Robert Caldwell published *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* which proved conclusively to many Tamils, according to Hudson, that there is a group of related languages named Dravidian that are distinct in origin and nature from the Indo-Aryan languages, that Tamil is the oldest of these, going back over 2,000 years, the most fully developed and the "purest," able to stand on its own completely without the aid of Sanskrit. If what the West has to offer is seen as supporting the aspirations of the people to whom it is offered, it is likely to be accepted.

3. Cross-cultural appropriation: independent parts or organic wholes?

The superiority of the West in science, technology, and power has posed a problem and a threat to all the other cultures of the earth. Two of the papers in this volume distinguish types of response made by non-Western nations to the hegemony of the West, ordered between the extremes of acceptance and rejection. Kenneth Ballhatchet, detailing Indian responses to the West, distinguishes models of acceptance, concealed acceptance, selective acceptance, and rejection. Acceptance is exemplifed by Young Bengal, a group of high-caste students at the Hindu College founded in 1817 to teach Western knowledge through the English language. Their acceptance of things Western led them to scandalize their elders by reading Tom Paine, eating beef, and drinking wine. Concealed acceptance is exemplified by the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu sect founded in 1828 by Ram Mohun Roy. He recovered from within the Indian tradition ideas and assumptions that resembled those flowing in from the West, finding, for example, a variety of Sanskrit texts to justify his claim that Hinduism was basically monotheistic. Selective acceptance is exemplified by the Dharma Sabha, an organization with the general aim of defending Hindu dharma and the specific purpose of campaigning for the repeal of the British prohibition of the burning of widows. Its members included vigorous supporters of English education, for it was assumed that Western knowledge could be assimilated without damage to traditional values. Rejection is exemplifed by Gandhi's *Hind Saraj*, a series of

articles written on board ship in 1908 in which he denied that India had any need of Western science or technology, or of Western institutions of any kind.

What is striking in Ballhatchet's scheme is the way in which cultural traditions and their elements are conceived as having a fixed and static character. The term "concealed acceptance" suggests a situation in which an element of one culture is adopted by another without essential modification, and the tradition of the adopting culture merely serves to screen the foreignness of the adopted element. But one can also think of a cultural tradition as developing organically, assimilating and transforming alien elements in a genuine development of its own potentialities.

Ying-shih Yü gave at the conference an outline of Chinese responses to the West that was pervaded by the sense of culture as an organic whole. He found a progressive realization by the Chinese that the scientific and technological achievements of the West are inseparable from its political and social institutions, and these from its culture. He distinguished three attitudes toward this culture, all reflecting an organic view: those of the Westernizers, of the Neo-Traditionalists, and of the Marxists. Yü says of the extreme Westernizer, Ch'en Tu-hsiu, that his view of culture as an integrated whole led him to the logical conclusion that China cannot import democracy and science without at the same time adopting Western culture in its entirety. For Hu Shih, a moderate Westernizer, the product of China's response to the West looks suspiciously occidental, "but scratch its surface and you will find that the stuff of which it is made is essentially the Chinese bedrock which much weathering and corrosion have only made stand out more clearly—the humanistic and rationalistic China resurrected by the touch of the scientific and democratic civilization of the new world." Again, according to the holistic theory of the neo-traditionalist Liang Shu-ming, unless Western values have been creatively transformed into congruent parts that fit perfectly well with the Chinese cultural system as a whole, they cannot be expected to grow on the Chinese soil. "Completely accept Western culture while fundamentally transforming it." Finally, the possibility of a transformed Chinese Marxism is suggested by the distinctive appeal of Marxism to the ambivalence of the Chinese toward the West. Perhaps one of the greatest secrets of its success, according to Yü, is that as a Western product it satisfies feelings of admiration for the West, while as anti-imperialist its satisfies feelings of hatred toward the West.

The difference between treating cultural elements as having a fixed and determinate character in isolation and treating them as dependent upon the whole in which they are ingredient is evidently a specific form of the familiar opposition between the primacy of the whole and the primacy of the part, and the earlier remarks concerning the opposition between the objectivity and subjectivity of science can be applied to this case also.

Conclusion: scholarly truth, popular distortion, and the essential interests of mankind

The scholarly interest in truth and the popular interest in superiority are not the only interests which govern intercultural perception, nor can they be presupposed in all men. Not all of us are scholars, nor do we all wish to identify ourselves with the crudities of popular perception. But, recalling Aristotle's conception of

the educated man, there are three sorts of interests which are essential to us all and which we all potentially share. These are interests in what is true always and everywhere, in the enjoyment of art, and in the appreciation of the values realized in men's lives. All relate to objects which are the same for all men and thus cut across the differences of cultures. The cosmos in which we exist is the same for us all, the enjoyment of art so far as it is grounded in what the work is is the same for us all, and however different our values may be from those of others, these values, to the extent that they are genuine, provide a ground for the appreciation of values different from our own. But the sciences and the arts and the actions and institutions of men are all cultural products. And so in this world of many cultures the essential interests of man depend on the perception of other cultures and their achievements. Any national culture, however great its achievments in science or art or action, represents only a small tributary to that great variety and richness of cultural objects arising from the confluence of all the cultures of the world. This is today the common patrimony of all mankind, and it is our interest in this which orders our interest in other forms of intercultural perception. The scholarly interest in truth provides us with cultural objects requisite to the essential interests of men, and on popular perception, with all its narcissism and distortions and pathological projections, depends the continued existence of the scholar, the populace, and mankind.