A Macrohistoriographical Essay on the idea of East and West from Herodotus to Edward Said

David Kopf

University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

**Recommended Citation**


Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol15/iss15/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
A MACROHISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY
ON THE IDEA OF EAST AND WEST
FROM HERODOTUS TO EDWARD SAID

DAVID KOPF

The Encounter Between East and West
In Myth and History

The idea or myth of encounter between an Orient and an Occident has been a major theme in macrohistory. Unfortunately, the theme has seldom been treated autonomously in an historiographical sense or as the history of the idea of East and West in historical writings. For centuries, historians and historical popularizers have been so emotionally involved in their allegations about the “Orient”, “Orientals” and “Orientalism”, for example, that they have rarely, if at all, detached the subject from their assumptions about race, religion, social evolution and the scale of civilization. From our own more liberated perspective of comparative history, it is astonishing how the great thinkers of the past were, on the matter of East and West, blind to the quality and degree of influence on their thought by the nation and time in which they lived.

With the rise of new nations in the East, accompanied by renaissances which have justified their integrity as cultures, the theme of Orient and Occident has moved into a new dimension of encounter. The older idea has consistently been exposed as a myth propagated by Westerners imbued with an exaggerated sense of cultural self-importance and global dominance. Has the shift in power differential prompted the Asian intelligentsia to conceive a radically new approach to the older polarity? Or do we find it in its familiar Procrustean bed of partisan politics and rank ethnocentrism? Has Rudyard Kipling simply been displaced by Edward Said?

In the following pages, I make a modest but determined effort to explore the landscape of the East-West heritage in the deep dark waters of our historical past. There is not the slightest intention, in this brief essay, to give a comprehensive history of the idea in historical literature. The project is, no doubt, a commendable undertaking. But the purpose, here, is to offer macrohistorians and other kinds of comparativists, an introduc-
tory analytical survey of the encounter by an historian of Asia who has studied the problem comprehensively for at least fifteen years.

The Uses of the Idea as Myth from Herodotus to Kipling

Most discussions on the origin of the East and West dichotomy have begun with Herodotus (484 to 425 B.C.). In his Histories, the encounter was between Greece, which represented Europe, and Persia which represented Asia. Herodotus, himself, never went beyond these two geopolitical and civilizational structures. He had little to say about India and nothing to say about China.

But later generations of Western intellectuals had a good deal to say about Herodotus on the subject of what divided East from West.\(^3\) They found or read into his largely descriptive prose the genesis of an idea that Greek civic virtue was sharply in contrast to Oriental despotism.\(^b\) On the other hand, some modern historians blame Herodotus and Aristotle, among the Greeks, for inventing these dubious claims about their own superiority.\(^c\) Other historians attribute the myth of East and West to Herodotus and his lively imagination which too often was substituted for historical accuracy.\(^d\) William Lockwood has pointed out that "Arnold Toynbee dismisses the whole dichotomy between Asia and Europe as nothing but a myth invented by Herodotus, who claimed that the Persians made war on the Greeks to avenge Troy (which they never heard of)."\(^1\)

Nevertheless, as Toynbee was only too well aware, from Herodotus to our own century, countless generations of historians rarely approached Eurasia as a unity, preferring instead to view Asia and Europe as two diametrically opposed systems. In large part, no doubt, this persistent attitude of a polarized world order was a reflection of a never ending military struggle between Europeans, on the one hand, and Parthians, Sassanids, Arabs and Ottomans, on the other.

But in terms of intercivilizational encounter, it is not too clear how and why great ideas or great men, for instance, became the historic property of Occident or Orient. Somehow, Alexander became a Western hero and Hellenization the precursor of contemporary Westernization.\(^e\) Bactria, a successor state to Alexander's empire, has been treated by historians as a Western outpost on India's northwest frontier;\(^2\) the Kushanas who carried the Bactrian heritage to its ultimate development, also on India's northwest frontier, are considered Orientals.\(^f\) Buddha and Christ had so much
in common as charismatic leaders of salvation ideologies, that their sacred biographies are almost identical in places. Also, it is impossible to this very day to know who borrowed what from whom. Moreover, Buddhism and Christianity had much in common concerning monasticism and other-worldliness. And yet, Christianity had been appropriated as "Western", Buddhism as "Oriental."

One must be reminded that these were not geographical comparisons but value judgments on what were held to be two distinctly different civilizational monoliths. It mattered little to the Western historians, professional and popular, that Islam was closely akin to the Judeo-Christian tradition, that Rome actually survived until the mid-fifteenth century as Byzantium, that China was more technologically advanced than Europe until the Industrial Age, or that Indo-Europeans in Iran and India were linguistically and ethnically derived from the same tribal cluster as were the Greeks, Romans and Germans.

My own impression is that this Berlin Wall of East-West encounter was constructed after the establishment of Western dominance in Asia. It was built on a foundation of implicit assumptions on the Orient and built from an ever increasing supply of stereotypical images of "Asiatick" cultures. I am not suggesting that there were not many cases of authentic contributions by sympathetic European scholars to Asian studies or that all the stereotypes by Western intellectuals on Asia were necessarily negative. The history of pre-Muslim Hindu and Buddhist civilizations in India may never have been rediscovered but for the work of British Orientalists such as William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke, H.H. Wilson and James Prinsep. There were also the Voltairs and Schopenhauers who built their favorable misconceptions of the East on positive stereotypes.

The fact is that by the late nineteenth century when Western imperialism had reached its highest point of far reaching power and dominance in the world, the idea of East-West encounter had become one of those sacred myths which no comparative historian would dare challenge. The question is whether there were many dispassionate and honest comparativists about in European intellectual circles who were not true believers in Western superiority. According to Alex Aronson who has done a thorough study of this very problem during this very period, the most gifted European intellectuals continually "made statements of a most misleading kind about the supposed relationship between East and West." The following quotation, caustic but true, deserves careful consideration because it deals with an aspect of Western thought too often ignored in Western intellectual thinking:
An instance... is Maeterlink's famous statement about the Eastern and the Western lobe in man's mental makeup... The Western lobe produces reason, science, consciousness; the other secretes intuition, religion, the subconscious... It is out of such an attitude that arise those amazing schemes, built up with all the pedantry of European scholarship, concerning the racial superiority of the 'Aryans', as in Gobineau, the superiority of the 'Teutons', as in H.S. Chamberlain, the 'senility' of Indian civilization, as in Hegel, or of Buddhism, as in Spengler... Once their thesis was established, all they had to do was to apply it, point by point, to what they considered to be 'reality'. Their ignorance which at times was appalling, could always be hidden behind a veil of cynical condescension masquerading as scholarship...

Aronson has little to say about the dozens of outstanding European scholars studying Asian philology, archeology, mythology and religion simply because they have little impact outside of academia except possibly on Asians themselves. Aronson's concern has been with the influential image-makers among such philosopher kings as Goethe, Schopenhauer, Hegel and Nietzsche. I am inclined to accept Aronson's generalizations that not a single one of these comparative world philosophers ever used Asia any more than as a means to advancing a philosophic argument about Europe's past, present or future.

Nietzsche is perhaps an excellent illustration. He incorporated earlier views on the East held by Goethe, Schopenhauer and Hegel, as well as by Gobineau. He was also familiar with Indian scholarship through his relationship with Paul Deussen, the respected Indologist and author of The System of the Vedanta (1883).

What was Nietzsche's conception of the Orient and how did he use it in his philosophy? The answer to the first part of the question is that he had no conception of the East and that his Orient was simply a collection of stereotypes of "Aryan" India and Iran. As for the second part of the question, since he believed in salvation by means of the warrior-type superman who was beyond good and evil, he identified with the popular contemporary German image of the Brahman caste being a survival of the pure Aryan race which had conquered the world with its military daring and skill. In this context, Nietzsche accepted Gobineau's golden age vision of a pure-blooded Aryan race whose achievements were due to a superior social organization and code of behavior.

But Europeans living in an age of Western dominance, were only too aware of the decline and fall of Indian civilization. Voltaire blamed it on Western commercial avarice long before Karl Marx appeared on the scene; Gobineau saw India's degeneration in the mixing of the pure Aryan blood with the inferior blood of the native races. Nietzsche,
misusing Schopenhauer to his own advantage, blamed the Buddhists. He rejected Buddhism not as an autonomous ideology in an Asian context, but as an alleged functional equivalent of Christianity which he abhorred for its life negational tendencies of misguided love and compassion. Nietzsche's idea of the Orient, was, therefore, a mere footnote in support of his interpretation of Western history. His idea was both positive and negative depending on whether he spoke of the Brahmanic superman or of the corrupting influences of Jesus and Buddha.

The German fascination with India and Iran is interesting since few, if any, of her poets, philosophers, and even scholars, travelled to either of these countries. Max Müller, among the greatest of nineteenth century Indologists, never set foot on Indian soil. The fact is that the German nation was a latecomer among imperialist powers, had no territorial empire in the East nor much of an overseas empire anywhere. The reverse was true for the British whose sea power had enabled her to filch an substantial amount of the world's real estate. No other Western nation had so completely imbibed the imperialist credo as part of its imperialist image. Even its most well intentioned liberals of the nineteenth century such as Thomas Babington Macaulay were deeply imbued with visions of national power and glory. As early as 1835, Macaulay wrote that:

The English . . . have spread their dominion over every quarter of the globe . . . have created a maritime power which would annihilate in a quarter of an hour the navies of Tyre, Athens, Carthage, Venice, and Genoa together, have carried the science of healing, the means of locomotion and correspondence, every mechanical art, every manufacture, everything that promotes the commerce of life to a perfection which our ancestors would have thought magical.

From precisely such outbursts of optimistic fervor was born the mythic equation that Westernization equals modernization. If the increasingly industrializing West came to be conceived as modernity personified, the East gradually sank to a level equivalent to the most technologically primitive societies or as social scientists called them a century later, the underdeveloped nations of the Third World. Neither the cosmogonic myths of golden ages nor the perfect moment of truth achieved by classical ages satisfied the futuristic projections of Western positivists. The cyclical view of history was abandoned by the intelligentsia for linear theories of progress.

The intellectual games played by German philosophers were meaningless to the Macaulays. The Vedas, Upanishads, Vedanta, the heritage of the Brahmans, Buddhists and Muslims were considered next to nothing against the promise of the present age. Macaulay put it rather brutally and
bluntly when he said in his famous Minute on Education in 1835 that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."**12**

**Between 1880-1910, or the period Allen Greenberger has called the "Era of Confidence for British Imperialism,"** cultural arrogance and exalted Westernism reached its highest point before the disastrous impact of World War I. It was the era of Kipling and his contemporaries when even an ounce of English blood could produce leadership in the least envied member of any inferior race. It was an era when even Christianity was organized as a colonial army of salvation and spiritually was measured by the size of one's biceps.

Macaulay, for all his ethnocentricism, still held out the hope of salvation to the East if Orientals would change their cultural citizenship and use their new English identity as a passport to modernity. Kipling was no Macaulay since he represented an imperialist credo that deplored intercivilizational interpenetration at the same time it denied the efficacy of Westernizing the inferior Asiatic breeds. The East and West were like a pyramid, Kipling's race at the apex and the Orientals at the base. Only the strength of the heroic soldier could bring East and West together. Otherwise:

Oh, East is East and
West is West, and
never the twain shall
meet. . . .

If for Kipling, the British were everything positive, powerful and progressive, the Indians, as Orientals, were just the opposite. Greenberger has made a careful list of Indian stereotypes gleaned from British fiction during this period. First, the Indians were made out to be a childlike race to whom the British were fatherlike authoritarian figures. "By right of race," says Greenberger, the Briton was the leader and father and the Indian the follower and child; any attempt to upset this was to go against the rules of nature."**14**

Secondly, like children, Orientals were "governed by their emotions rather than by their reason."**15** Thirdly, they were conservatie and as a culture "do not change, except under pressure from without, and they disintegrate suddenly."**16** Finally, they were passive and happy in their passivity, fatalistically so.

To Kipling, the Western educated Indian, generally associated with the Bengali babu, was both frightening and grotesque, a Frankenstein of
British acculturation policies. Greenberger maintains that what Kipling feared about Westernized Asians was the process of acculturation itself, which to him was a sword with two edges, the Westernization of Orientals and the Orientalization of the British. At best, Kipling believed that if the British kept their racial and cultural characteristics pure they would make better rulers and would earn the respect of their Indian subjects. Aloofness, then, might preserve British integrity and the Empire. In the end, therefore, the British were not so different from the Germans and other European race theorists. Behind the fear of syncretism was a fear that the racial superiority of the West could and would be lost by a mixing of Eastern with Western blood.

Life Negation and the Indianization of the "East"

World War I was a brutal and terrifying shock to West European countries who suffered a considerable loss of men, resources and money. Among the lesser noticed losses were a sense of national well being and purpose and that simplistic faith in the idea of progress. Nevertheless, war's end found Western dominance persisting in the East in the familiar guise of imperial rule and colonialism. Greenberger calls this period between the wars an "era of self-doubt" for the British in which the entire imperial experience was questioned. In fact, in some circles, it was not merely questioned but violently attacked. Interestingly enough, the critics Greenberger refers to attacked imperialism not for the harm it did to Oriental peoples and their cultures, but for its demoralizing impact on Western civilization.

Most British writers, Greenberger asserts, turned a deaf ear to the Indian nationalists argument that the contemporary Orient was not so much the creation of decadent civilizations held together by inhumane and corrupt traditions as it was the tragic result of colonialist oppression. Hinduism, in particular, was singled out as the most dangerously abusive and irrational of all Oriental belief systems. E. M. Forster's highly-acclaimed *Passage to India* which was first published in 1924, is perhaps the case in point illustrating the fact that even the most sensitive and intelligent of novelists was not immune to the prejudicial attitudes of his time. On the surface, this is the story of an alleged rape of an Englishwoman by a Muslim in a cave somewhere in Western India. Actually, the novel deals with the deadly impact of Hindu negation on British character. Forster's cave was no mere backdrop, according to Greenberger, but a symbol representing "the sudden intrusion of timelessness,
the horror of absolute vacuum in which human ambition, love, hate, even religion vanish as undifferentiated particles down an eternal drain.”[19]

To Greenberger, the attitudes of Kipling and Forster to the Hindu menace were not dissimilar. The difference was that Kipling’s heroes resisted negation and ended their India tours still reaffirming their “faith in progress and the value of Western civilization.”[20] But Forster’s characters are too fascinated by the cave and in the end “embrace their negation.”[21] Stanley Cooperman, who has compared Kipling and Forster as imperialist writers, feels the same way. Forster’s Europeans succumb to Indianization because they lack the “moral will” of an earlier generation.[1]

By Indianization, the British seem to mean Hinduization. It is the Hindus who have been exposed as the carriers of the deadly metaphysical disease known as life negation. Forster himself accepted Indian Muslims as being closer to the Western ideal. Nirad Chaudhuri believes that all the Hindus are presented in Passage to India “either as perverted, clownish, or queer characters.”[22] Even Dr. Godbole, Forster’s chief Hindu character, and the novel’s mouthpiece of Hinduism, is, in Chaudhuri’s view, “not an exponent of Hinduism but a clown.”[23] On the other hand, the book’s most rational Indian and chief Indian character, Aziz, is a Muslim. Lawrence Brander, who has also written on Forster, made the following comparison about Hindus and Muslims in Passage:

The first two parts of the novel are Muslim and Forster gets inside his Muslim characters with ease, for the Muslim is completely our brother, an exaggeration of our best selves. The difficulty comes in the third part when he deals with the Hindus.[m]

Hinduphobia was, of course, a more characteristic response of the British who from the time James Mill published his History of British India in 1819, were continually articulating their ambivalence about their Indian connection. In Germany it had been otherwise. Then in the period following World War I, the Germans began to stress the life negational aspect of Hindu thought. The influential sociologist, Max Weber, was convinced that among Orientals, Hindus were exceedingly other worldly in their religion. They saw life as an abode of transient and meaningless drives from which an individual spent a lifetime achieving liberation. In the West, on the contrary, since the Protestant Reformation, people worked to better themselves and the world around them; to improve the world was worthwhile because it was a manifestation of God’s purpose. Weber’s dialectic between East and West was between the alleged Hindu
gnosticism which rejected the world with a passion, and the Protestant Ethic which passionately transformed the world into an instrument for human salvation.¹¹

Albert Schweitzer argued rather much the same thing about Hinduism in his famous treatise on Indian Thought and Its Development (1936). As a dedicated missionary in Africa, Schweitzer was mostly concerned about the contrast between the Christian ethic of doing positive good in the world and the Indian ethic (both Hindu and Buddhist) which denied the value of such conduct since the “world is meaningless and sorrowful.”²⁴ Only on the surface, he believed, did Christianity resemble Indian thought as an ideology of life negation. Said Schweitzer:

Jesus does not preach the inactive ethic of perfecting the self alone, but active, enthusiastic love of one’s neighbor. It is because His ethic contains the principle of activity that it has affinity with world and life affirmation.²⁵

There were at least two noteworthy departures from nineteenth century German biases in Schweitzer. First, he repudiated race as a significant variable in the comparative history of East and West. The Indian Aryans may have invented the concept of life negation whereas Aryans elsewhere believed just the opposite.²⁶ Secondly, if many European thinkers redeemed the Muslims as non-Orientals, Schweitzer redeemed the Chinese as exponents of the principle of world and life affirmation.²⁷ On the other hand, the reference in both cases was to a Weltanschauung of life affirmation in pristine Islam and Confucianism that was undefiled by Hindu contact and influence.

Interestingly enough, the idea that India was the source of all that Westerners feared and hated about the East was not only the belief of many Europeans during this period, but was commonly used as a rationalization for historic decline by Asians themselves. Indianization became a convenient scapegoat both for South Asian Muslims and for Chinese Neo-Confucian intellectuals. The Muslims blamed Hinduism and the Chinese blamed Buddhism for crippling their respective civilizations with the metaphysical disease of life negation. Neither Islam nor Confucianism was held responsible for Western dominance in Asia. Had both civilizations not been contaminated by the two pernicious forms of Indianization, the Islamic world and China could have developed their potential and become progressive partners to Western nations.

Hu Shih, a professor of philosophy at the National University of Peking, was one of the more articulate members of precisely this kind of scapegoat school of Chinese renascent theory. His article on “The Indianization of China” for a Harvard University Tercentenary volume
on comparative world history, is perhaps the best historiographical study of this sort. The article appeared in 1937 when Chinese coastal cities were being ravaged by Japanese armies. The Japanese rape of Shanghai seemed the ultimate of humiliating experiences by industrial powers which had continued unabated for over a century. The Revolution of 1911 seemed to have gone nowhere. China remained impotent.

The article by Hu Shih purported to do two things: demonstrate that Oriental history in China was not indigenously Chinese and that China has had an historical development comparable with that of the West. Hu Shih’s main thesis was that China underwent Indianization rather much as Europe underwent Christianization. Buddhism was China’s Christianity and it changed China’s culture drastically. Said Hu Shih about the more important “items of belief and practice” that poured from India by land and by sea into China:

The ideas that the world is unreal, of life as painful and empty, of sex as unclean, of the family as an impediment to spiritual attainment, of celibacy and mendicancy . . . of almsgiving . . . of love extended to all sentient beings, of vegetarianism, of rigid forms of asceticism, of words and spells as having miraculous power. . . . These are only a few drops in that vast flux of Indian religious and cultural invasion.

Hu Shih denied the common historical assertion that Buddhism was easily “uprooted” in China by “persecution.” “It continued to be the greatest religion in China,” argued Hu Shih, and even now “continues to Indianize Chinese life, thought, and institutions.” China’s only hope was to inaugurate a movement akin to the European Renaissance and structured along the lines of a “re-interpretation of the pre-Buddhist heritage” The quest for the authentic Chinese tradition had to be wedded to the progressive currents of thought and values of the West. The objective of the Chinese Renaissance was to liberate the civilization from the stranglehold of Oriental life and world negation by which India had diverted China from her proper course of history. In Hu Shih’s own words:

With the new aids of modern science and technology, and of the new social and historical sciences, we are confident that we may yet achieve a rapid liberation from the two thousand years’ cultural domination by India.

Life Negation in the Modern West and Life Affirmation in the Traditional East

In the era following World War II, there was the intellectual tendency in the United States to disavow the adventurous spirit of the Faustian man
of the West and to reevaluate life negation in the East as a positive ideology of salvation for a world continually on the brink of some ultimate disaster. Modern warfare, the explosion of nuclear devices, environmental pollution and the pursuit of loneliness in Western life, suggested to an alienated intelligentsia that the Orient may have been right all along and that it was the West which had taken the wrong road to oblivion.

Stephen Hay has shown in his *Asian Ideas of East and West* (1970) that the idea of the West being in a state of spiritual and moral crisis was a common reaction among the Asian intelligentsia from India to Japan. Even Anglophiles such as Keshub Chandra Sen and Rabindranath Tagore in British India, recoiled with horror from the excesses of Western militarism and imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. From their vantage point in the colonies, and long before Spengler, Asian intellectuals saw the idea of progress as an illusion and Western civilization in a serious state of decline.

But the faith in Positivism persisted among the Western elites. Then, in the wake of two world wars, Hitlerism, Stalinism, Hiroshima, the faith began to crumble as ambivalence in the West set in. Younger people redirected their quest for truth eastward to an alleged profusion of alternative attitudes about the ends of human existence. Oddly enough, at the same time that the West readied itself for Zen Buddhism, Yoga classes and the influx of gurus from India, Asians prepared themselves for the great leap forward into the age of high technology.

In *Psychotherapy East and West* (1961), Alan Watts spoke for a generation of disillusioned Westerners who could no longer equate twentieth century modernity with life affirmation. Thanks to Watt's popularization of Asian thought, the East ceased to be symbolic of all that the West dreaded about the Orient. It was no longer exotic, inscrutable, occult, life or world denying. The East became the true source of eternal wisdom. The great ideas were no longer monopolized in quotations from the intellectual forerunners of the modern West, but were increasingly found in the once-maligned sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.

In this particular book on psychotherapy, Watts viewed himself as the Columbus of the psyche who had discovered in the sacred texts of the East a new world full of promise for liberating humanity from anxiety and neuroses. The Western psychiatric idea that therapy was equal to social adjustment, was to Watts comparable to believing that the earth was flat. Buddhism, Vedantism and Yoga were not religions of escapism but
critiques of orthodox systems or cultures. Eastern mystics were reformers of the human condition and rebels against all organized attempts to repress the human spirit. They were dangerous to the defenders of the status quo because they exposed the causal connection between human suffering and false norms and values imposed by rigid institutional structures. Watts believed that the term “maya,” for example, or “illusion,” represented a critical concept which had been greatly misunderstood in the West. It did not mean that the world was unreal but that the artificial world-conception of a culture was an illusion. In the following quotation, Watts spelled out what he understood as maya in relation to the central idea of Eastern psychotherapy:

The aim of a way of liberation is not the destruction of maya but seeing it for what it is, or seeing through it . . . ideas of the world and of oneself which are social conventions and institutions are not to be confused with reality. The rules of communication are not necessarily the rules of the universe, and man is not the role of identity which society thrusts upon him.\(^{35}\)

Watts not only intended to transform the image of life negation into a positive idea of social criticism and individual self-realization, but he tried also to change the image of the practitioner from passive, life denying ascetic to Promethean hero who resists social oppression to liberate the human psyche. This brought Watts into conflict with Freud and Freudians over the dubious concept of the Nirvana-principle. In Freud's view, the change of consciousness and personality effected in Eastern ways of liberation brought about “depersonalization” or “regression to an infantile mode of awareness.”\(^{36}\) Freud’s Nirvana-principle was another way of reducing Eastern liberation to life negation. The Oriental’s quest for Nirvana which literally means extinction represented “the longing for return to the oceanic consciousness of the womb.”\(^{37}\) Destroying his ego was tantamount to burning his bridge to society and social responsibility.

Watts refused to accept the Freudian notion that the search for wholeness in nature or the universe was necessarily a negative act of regression. “Our mistake has been,” said Watts, “to suppose that the individual is honored and his uniqueness enhanced by emphasizing his separation from the surrounding world, or his eternal difference in essence from his Creator.”\(^{38}\) When one looks at “the lively and varied features . . . of Chinese and Japanese paintings . . . the ideal personality here shown is anything but the collective nonentity or the weakling ego dissolving back into the womb.”\(^{39}\)
The Americanization of Eastern Studies

Among the establishment academics in America researching and teaching Asia, the 1960s was an exciting decade of easily procured grants to support a wide variety of projects in the humanities and the social sciences. It can be truly said that Americans took Asia very seriously and independent India, in particular, was overrun by a generation of linguistically competent regional specialists.

In the United States, the intense intellectual concern for Asian area studies only came after the demise of Western empires in the East. The fact is that Asian studies in American education itself underwent a national liberation struggle for autonomous recognition in the university curriculum. To study India, for example, before the 1950s, one had to take courses in British Empire or the Expansion of the West. Moreover, the United States had become a world power and the challenge by the Soviet Union in the 1950s seemed to accentuate the need for cultivating Asian language and area studies. Government support for crucial languages that only a few Americans knew, justified in the name of national defense, accelerated the process of deepening American scholarly interest in the East.

Americans entered the Asian field as individuals from a diversity of backgrounds, disciplines, and purposeful commitment to given culture areas. There were former missionaries who had served in China or India and the sons of missionaries, World War II intelligence officers who had served in the China-India-Burma theater, and a legion of anthropologists, political scientists and economists who saw Asia as a golden opportunity to test out fashionable theories on acculturation, charismatic leadership and modernization.

Though the older generation of Americans were scientifically oriented, the younger scholars tended to approach Asia as cultural relativists and structuralists. The reason was that most of the grant money available for students was designed to train language and area specialists. It should come as no surprise that these very specialists ultimately shaped the American conception of Asia which if the truth were known, is no conception at all. Language and area studies destroyed much of the older interest and focus on the international monoliths such as Asia and the West. Attention was now concentrated, not infrequently for a lifetime, on intracivilized regional and local societies and cultures. The assault had begun in earnest to level the macro conception of Asia and leave it as ruin for future archeologists of human consciousness. In its place were being
constructed a pluralistic universe where diversity was king and where Asia was proliferated into an endless number of cultural units, each being shaped by a scholar who endowed it with its own integrity and history.  

The problem of unity and diversity in the American approach to Asia was very much in evidence early in the 1960s when the Committee of Oriental Studies at Columbia University organized a conference on this subject and invited the very best Asianists to participate. The transactions were later published as Approaches to Asian Civilizations which was an apt title because it suggested that diversity was a more fitting way to approach Asia among Americans and that its convenors and editors believed it important to express as many different attitudes and methods as were possible.

The book is significant from the viewpoint of East-West encounter in the manner that the problem was ignored or dismissed. Only one of twenty-nine scholars even bothered to address himself to it. To be sure, the universalist attitude of the social scientist was present in the papers given by William Lockwood and Daniel Lerner. But they were out of place because they seemed far more concerned with abstract models of tradition and modernity as they related to an anticipated homogenized world in the future, than with discrete culture patterns in Asia.

Only Karl Wittfogel in his article on "Ideas and the Power Structure," appeared willing to carry on the historiographical tradition of differentiating the East from the West. In the past, as we have seen, macro studies of the East and West invariably meant macro level generalizations. Wittfogel was no exception. In the article which was based on his Oriental Despotism, Wittfogel argued that the power structure was the unifying factor in all Asian empires. From ancient times, said Wittfogel, "Western observers have been struck by the extraordinary strength of the state in 'Asia'." Oriental despotism, in sharp contrast to the democratic West, can be traced back historically to the earliest attempts to control and maintain vast irrigation systems which were essential to produce the food surplus upon which the agriculturally-based civilizations depended for survival.

In the United States today Wittfogel's idea of hydraulic despotism, like F.S.C. Northrop's idea of the "undifferentiated aesthetic continuum" which he has treated as a core concept in the Asian mind, have become relics of a past which Americans have largely rejected. At the Columbia conference, the comparative approach was still a matter of debate. Ainslie Embree who commented on Wittfogel's paper, argued for the
need of "great intellectual constructs," but then cautioned that these conceptual schemes "could prove so entrancing" that they would "be accepted with uncritical enthusiasm." In another paper, Arthur Wright warned that if we became too comparative about China and the world, we would lose the distinction between what was "Chinese history" and what was "metahistory." This angered F.L.K. Hsu who challenged Wright's "negativism" and argued that if "each civilization were unique, then we could learn nothing from history or ethnography, and we will be forced to throw the sciences of man into the river." Richard Lambert, South Asian sociologist and one of the forerunners of the language and area programs in the United States, proved to be prophetic about what he called the "uniquist" approach to the study of Asia. In his own words:

This term implies something more than the fact that each of us tends to be working on only one area, it implies the belief that the culture we are studying is in many ways unique. Light is to be shed upon one aspect of the culture by probing more deeply into its unique setting. In contrast to the comparativist realm where the grand system builder is king, in the ranks of the uniquist, the man with the greatest depth of erudition in the smallest fragment of a single culture reigns supreme.

McNeill's History of the Human Community: Europe and Asia Joined at Last

It should surprise no one that America's only supreme effort at writing comparative history on the grand scale, William McNeill's *Rise of the West*, was the least philosophical of any world history ever written. McNeill was Toynbee's nephew but as world historians, there was no intellectual kinship between the two. McNeill's preface to what he subtitled a "History of the Human Community," was mostly composed of apologies for shortcomings and a list of acknowledgements. There was no introduction and the conclusion was simply an extension of the narrative in which predictions were made for the future cosmopolitan world order.

It is little wonder that McNeill has been so respected among American historians. His book was immensely rich in detail; every argument was amply documented from the best sources found in dozens of historiographical traditions; the style was lucid and never obscured by flights of poetic imagination or philosophic discourse. There was a judicious choice of maps, charts and illustrations. The methodology was so impeccable from a professional historian's point of view, that it seemed hardly possible that McNeill was writing a history of the world.
Nevertheless, *The Rise of the West* has a conceptual framework and has contributed historiographically to the problem of East-West encounter. First, McNeill, the diffusionist, followed a technological device, religious inspiration, philosophic idea or aesthetic creation from civilization to civilization in order to demonstrate that the historical modification of any of these culture complexes was largely a result of intercivilizational interaction. For McNeill therefore the idea that high cultures were afforded the luxury of pursuing essentially independent careers was a myth. Secondly, there was no East or West but a Eurasian community of civilizations from the Mediterranean Sea or later, Atlantic Ocean, to the China Sea. Eurasian history was a history of critical interrelations from the beginnings of recorded time to the present.

Finally, McNeill concerned himself with the great movements which have arisen from time to time in one civilization or another such as Hellenism, Buddhism and Islam. The point here is not that they have all been cross cultural in impact but that each has disturbed the balance of the Eurasian community of cultures, although only relatively so. The significance of the rise of Western Europe since the sixteenth century was that, for the first time, one of the civilizations became so powerful that it ultimately dominated the others.

Though McNeill paid occasional lip service to such terms as the Orient and the Occident, and despite the use of "West" in his title, the book has been purged of most of the older stereotypes. The relentless flux of history from Europe to East Asia which McNeill depicted in all its majestic fury, had at last swept away the more dubious images of the earlier imperialist era.

*From East and West to North and South*

American scholars have no doubt radically altered the traditional perspective on the East-West encounter. Whether guilty of academic imperialism in Asia or not, no one would deny that they have produced a set of new verifiable generalizations on discrete cultures from a wealth of hard data. Many Americans feel they have made authentic discoveries because they have approached other cultures as insiders learning to speak and behave like natives. Americans have even carried anthropological relativism to its ultimate and in the process, some believe, transcended the imperialist ethos and finally laid to rest the persisting and, often, pernicious myth of East and West.

But myths and ideas die hard unless the conditions which produced
them also disappear. Even if the conditions disappear, persisting perceptions may not. Symbols which have been discarded by scholars may still be usefully manipulated for political reasons. In 1978, for example, a book appeared on *Orientalism* which was written by a professor of comparative Western literature who also happened to be a highly politicized and militant Palestinian.  

For Edward Said, the author, the encounter between East and West was still very much alive first because of the Israelis, and secondly, because the so-called Oriental cultures of today were perverted creations by the West to maintain its world dominance. Said did not believe that imperialism ended with the fall of West European empires in Asia; on the contrary, America and her Asian scholars have extended it with new forms of dominance and myth-making about Orientals.

Said, and angry man, has used or misused "Orientalism" as a sewer category for all the intellectual rubbish Westerners have exercised in the global marketplace of ideas. Though Westernized, he admitted that he never "lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as an Oriental." It is precisely because men like Said feel that their identity has been lost in the network of Western myths and illusions created out of the East, that they have revived the myth of East-West polarity. As with V.S. Naipaul, also an eloquent and sophisticated Westernized writer, Edward Said's quest for the true Asia is a projection of his own identity crisis.

More recently, East and West, though no longer identified as such, have been seen from a new perspective. The fact that Japan has become the equal of any Western nation or that China has won enormous respect for her potential power, seems to suggest that older political and economic disparities between the West and the East are becoming increasingly meaningless. The disparities between higher and lower standards of living, military strength, industrialism and high technology seem much more evident between North and South than between West and East. Japan, China, the Soviet Union, Europe and North America constitute the North whereas Southeast and South Asia, West Asia and Africa, Central and Latin America constitute the South. In 1980 a new periodical was published from London called *South* which not only incorporated the idea but claimed for itself to be "The Third World Magazine."

*South*, for all its attempts to articulate a new position in world affairs, cannot betray the fact that the object of its wrath remains the West which is still, as always, the source of all the evils that plague the have-not
nations. It is only the East which has seemingly disappeared but has actually been absorbed in a larger community of peoples, cultures and nations who share in common an acute sense of frustration at having remained backward and undeveloped. The editorials and articles in South suggest that the Third World cannot accept the fact that the privileged fraternity of Western nations now includes the Soviet Empire and Japan, with China standing at the door for admission. Seemingly, just as the West used the East as a scapegoat to explain its own alleged decline following World War I, the Third World now uses the West as a scapegoat for its own inability to achieve modernization in our own time.

University of Minnesota

NOTES

a. For an excellent example of this in the precise context of East-West encounter, see C.N. Parkinson, East and West (New York: Mentor Book, 1965), pp. 53-56.

b. For a complete list of Greek virtues supposedly unique to themselves, see Parkinson, East and West, pp. 57-68.

c. For Jawaharlal Nehru, an Indian freedom fighter who wrote a world history in a British prison, the superiority of Greek culture which Herodotus "referred to" was based on a sense of individual freedom which when practised, made the Greeks supermen. J. Nehru, Glimpses of World History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 17.

d. It is fashionable, today, to use Herodotus as a source but cautiously and in conjunction with other sources. William McNeill's judgment is among the most balanced I have seen. He reprimands Herodotus for exaggerating the contrast between Greeks and Persians and for his tendency to be vague and confusing at times. Nevertheless, McNeill concludes about "the interpretation of facts" by Herodotus that "despite its transparent bias, it still dominates scholarship." W.H. McNeill, The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 202, 256n, 268.

e. For the classic text on Hellenism, see W.W. Tarn, Hellenistic Civilization (New York: Meridian Books, 1966).


g. See Radhakrishnan's excellent discussion of this in S. Radhakrishnan, Eastern Religions and Western Thought (New York: Galaxy Book, 1959), pp. 186-7.

h. For a monograph on British Orientalism, see D. Kopf, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California, 1969).

i. Voltaire's writings on Asia include Fragments on some Revolutions in and on the death of Count de Lalli (1773); his Essay on the Customs and the spirit of
the nations (1765) which has several long sections on India; and his History of the Age of Louis XIV which contains much material on seventeenth century Europe and Asia. Schopenhauer's references to Buddhism can be found in his The World as Will and Idea.

j. Gobineau's The Inequality of the Human Races (1853) is discussed in A. Aronson, Europe Looks at India A Study in Cultural Relations (Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1945), pp. 87-93. For his influence on Nietzsche, see Aronson, pp. 102-104.


l. S. Cooperman quoted in Greenberger, The British Image of India.

m. L. Brander quoted in Greenberger, The British Image of India, p. 129.


p. Many of these persons collaborated in publishing the first syllabi on Indian Civilization. See Introduction to the Civilization of India (Chicago: Syllabus Division, University of Chicago, 1957).


r. This was especially true of D. Lerner, "Basic Problems in the Contemporary Transformation of Traditional Societies," T. de Bary, A.T. Embree, eds., Approaches to Asian Civilization (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 219-239.

s. For a more extensive analysis of Said, see D. Kopf, "Hermeneutics versus History," The Journal of Asian Studies, XXXIX (May 1980), 495-506.

REFERENCES


4. A. Aronson, Europe Looks at India A Study in Cultural Relations (Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1945), p. 2.

5. Aronson, pp. 4-5.

8. Aronson, p. 22.
10. Aronson, pp. 104-106.
15. Greenberger, p. 43.
16. Greenberger, p. 44.
26. Schweitzer, p. 3.
29. Shih, p. 223.
30. Shih, p. 223.
32. Shih, p. 247.
36. Watts, p. 23.
37. Watts, p. 23.
38. Watts, p. 23.
40. de Bary, Embree, eds., *Approaches to Asian Civilizations*.
42. Wittfogel, p. 86.
50. Said, p. 25.
51. South is published by South Publications Limited, New Zealand House, London.