

Reverse Orientalism

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Looking briefly at some of the prisms Edward W. Said has fashioned in his book Orientalism (New York, 1978) to interpret Westerners' approaches to societies termed "Oriental," let us turn certain of these prisms around and apply them to Oriental societies.

A main thesis of Said, drawing on Gramsci and others, is that knowledge is power; not only does such knowledge fashion the image one has of another culture or society, it is also used to dominate that culture. In spite of the breadth of Said's thesis--the lack of qualification and the sometimes selective, sometimes mechanical way the potpourri of Western discourse on Islam is fitted to his pattern (which itself is a conscious archeological construct à la Foucault)--there is a large ring of truth to what he says.

A thesis of Said is that Culture A's representation of the reality of Culture B, particularly when Culture A is militarily and/or economically much stronger than Culture B, will likely be used as justification to try to change (i.e., to reform, to "correct") that B's reality, supposedly for B's own good but in fact largely and insidiously to serve A's own self-interest and self-image.

This thesis perhaps can find no better illustration than in Japan's protracted excursions into China and other parts of Asia. The archeological digs, economic surveys, and translation projects that accompanied the Japanese incursion into China earlier in this century parallel in interesting ways the great collective work of erudition that appeared in the wake of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, the Description de l'Egypte, which Said makes so much of. The compiling, preserving, cataloging, mapping, and photographing that the Japanese did in China was most impressive; the attitude towards the subject of study, however, was in some ways less than impressive. This attitude, this mindset, could and did also result in less benign undertakings, such as the experiments carried out on Chinese similar to those the Nazis performed on Jews. The people in the twentieth century who most actively sought to occupy and control China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and Oceania--politically, economically, and militarily--and to teach and modernize these people, all on the basis of knowing (better than the Chinese or others themselves knew) what was good for them, were none other than the Japanese.¹

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One might take Said's interpretive prism and ask, perhaps not so rhetorically, what would we see happen to certain present-day societies should they be subjected to the preceptions-cum-power of a dominant "Oriental" society? What if Iranian ayatollahs could make over American society? What if mainland China took over Taiwan? What in fact has happened since China took over Tibet? One can imagine (or note) all sorts of things that might be done (or have been done) for these peoples' own good.

Other prisms Said uses to look at "Westerners Orientalizing" might also be turned around on societies termed Oriental. Given the vast literature in Japanese that treats of modern-day America--diaries, travel books, guides, reflections by visitors (whose stays extend anywhere from a week to decades), and novels placed in the U.S. or involving interaction with Americans--there is room for fruitful analysis of how this body of literature serves Said's characterization of Westerners' descriptions of the Middle East: They are "not so much a way of receiving new information as...a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things... [The culture] thereafter is 'handled': its novelty and its suggestiveness are brought under control" (p. 59). To what extent does such literature tell us more about the Japanese who write it than it does about its putative subject?²

The main topic I would like to address here, however, is the set of attitudes that many, most, or perhaps nearly all ethnically Oriental scholars seem to bring to Western scholars of and Western-language scholarship on their cultures. I do not pretend that these attitudes are the same in all "Oriental" societies or that the degree of their presence is the same. I shall discuss the two areas with which I am most familiar: China and Japan.

A fundamental view, with certain variations and corollaries, seems to be: "Only we can understand us." Namely, only Chinese can truly understand Chinese, Chinese culture, and the Chinese people. Only Japanese can truly understand Japanese, etc. In other words, only Chinese can speak with any real knowledge about China, or some extension of the formulation: Only in a very limited sense can any non-Chinese hope to or presume to say anything worthwhile or significant about China. And, if a non-Chinese does speak with knowledge, it still does not have the same authority. Authority includes being Chinese.

What we have here is not only a deeply rooted view that knowledge is experience--or at least that experiential knowledge is more important than any other kind of knowledge³--but also a profound culturalism, a culturalism woven deeply into the social-historical fabric and consciousness that self-defines, self-validates, and sets oneself up and apart as the sole arbiter of what one is in a way that necessarily excludes non-members of the cultural group.⁴ For anyone

who facilely thinks such attitudes, especially in the more restricted form of nationalism, have been primarily prompted in East Asia only in recent decades or centuries by the cultural onslaught of the West, I should point out that many of the attitudes that I am referring to --culturalism, nationalism, and a kind of "ethnic racism," all rolled into one--were already very much in evidence in China by the twelfth century.⁵

I shall first elaborate on Chinese attitudes toward Western scholars and scholarship on China. In its contemporary form, the web of culturalism just noted generally includes the following assumption: Since Westerners can have little if anything valuable to say about our culture, we Chinese can ignore whatever they might have to say about it. That is precisely what happens in the overwhelming majority of cases. China-educated scholars of Chinese literature and history, especially pre-modern history, and other areas as well (be they trained in Taiwan, mainland China, or even Hong Kong), are exceptional indeed if they have read almost any sinological material at all written by Westerners in English or any other Western language. The situation is better in the social sciences, disciplines that originated in the West (and that have attendant problems of their own as a consequence). But real acquaintance with Western-language literature on a China-related traditional area is rare indeed on the part of these native-trained scholars.

To put matters more cynically from instances I have witnessed, some Chinese scholars pick up works in English on China, look for some error, eventually find one, and in the process confirm their initial view that such works do not merit their attention in the first place. It is not so much that their superiority in the role of Chinese judging works on Chinese culture is confirmed; that was never in question. In fact, it goes with the initial stance. This is probably never more clear than it is with translation, where almost any Chinese, in my experience, no matter how poorly versed, say, in Sung period poetry, and no matter how ill-equipped to judge anything of the nuance and range of meaning of the target language (English, German, etc.), feels, in the persona of being an ethnic Chinese, automatically qualified to judge the accuracy, quality, and style of translation.

Chinese ignorance of and ignoring of Western-language scholarship on China are unfortunate enough, but Chinese ignorance of and ignoring of Japanese scholarship on China are even more striking. Japan, with its long traditions of scholarship on China, has produced in this century alone a galaxy of outstanding China scholars.⁶ There is virtually no area in Chinese studies in which one can afford to overlook relevant Japanese scholarship. And general reference works for the China field compiled by Japanese scholars--indexes, dictionaries, glossaries, handbooks, single- and multi-volume cyclopedias--should be at the fingertips of China scholars everywhere. It is

surprising to see how few China scholars in Taiwan learn Japanese.⁷ When recently taking a tour of the library at Fu-jen University, I noted that not a single Japanese-language book on China was to be seen. In Hong Kong, neither of the major universities requires its Ph.D.'s in the China field to know any Japanese. At National Taiwan University, Professor Lin Wen-yueh told me that not one in ten of her students has a reasonably good reading knowledge of both Japanese and English. I would be surprised if the situation on mainland China is much better.

It is all so circular and reinforcing. If the assumption on the part of Chinese is that, these people, be they Japanese or Westerners, have little worthwhile to say, or what they do have to say is a different kind of knowledge because it is not by Chinese, then their ignorance is both justified and perpetuated, especially when there are very few books in the library by non-Chinese to make them aware that they might be missing something. In my view, this situation necessarily affects the quality of the scholarship by Chinese on China. Much of it is second-rate. Most of it is provincial, both in terms of being limited to works by ethnic Chinese written in Chinese and in terms of there seldom being any theoretical discussion of the academic discipline involved, especially as regards history and literature. This is not to say there is no outstanding scholarship by Chinese on China; of course, there is. But even the best, if it is of the sort I have just described, could have been still better had the authors tapped these other worlds of discourse.⁸

By way of contrast, let us now turn to the Japanese case. The set of assumptions many Japanese have toward Western scholars of and scholarship on Japan takes on its own special configuration. A fundamental element to this is what I call the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too syndrome, which I think has broad implications for Japanese dealings with the outside world. The basic formulation of this is simple. We Japanese can read, understand, and appreciate Shakespeare or Goethe or Tu Fu, but no non-Japanese, no outsider, can truly understand or appreciate Bashō or Genji or basically anything about Japan. Why? Because we're special. The have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too image comes from having it both ways: being universalist, all-encompassing Japanese, and being particularist and, above all, insular Japanese. So much reinforces this stance, especially the insider-outsider dichotomy that so pervades Japanese social relations and the Japanese language, not to mention the fact of Japan's long-time physical and psychological isolation. All too many Japanese are flattered by outsiders' interest in their culture, humored by and admiring of outsiders' struggles to achieve a measure of control of their language, and yet increasingly uncomfortable or even exclusionist when faced with real achievement, though ultimately many are willing to give credit where it is due.

What so distinguishes Japanese from Chinese attitudes, in my

experience, is the fact that many Japanese are very curious about and interested in what Westerners have to say about them--about Japanese history, culture, language, and customs--whereas most Chinese quite simply do not give a damn what others think about them. The Japanese view has its plus and minus sides. On the one hand, there is Japanese interest in the views others have of Japan, considerable awareness of these views, and in some cases real respect for them. The minus side, however, is that much of this interest is basically narcissistic. This is the case not just because the focus of attention is on one's own (i.e., Japanese) culture. It is also because the interest is mostly limited to certain Westerners' views--say, to an Edwin Reischauer or a Donald Keene; there is little interest in the views of people considered unimportant or inferior--for example, Chinese or Southeast Asians, to say nothing of Koreans or South Asians.

All of this is part and parcel both of the narcissistic form the plethora of Nihonjin-ron 日本人論 (what it means to be Japanese) discussions take, and of the way feelings of superiority and inferiority chase and feed each other in Japanese attitudes toward the outside world. Truly remarkable is the overweening interest of many Japanese cultural historians in the tokushoku 特色 of Japan--i.e., in those things being the unique, special, and defining characteristics of Japan--the things that make Japan and the Japanese and Japanese cultural manifestations so different, so special, so unique (and thus accessible only to an insider, i.e., a Japanese). The double standard that lies behind the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too syndrome--one standard for the outside world, another for the inside world of Japan--is just a natural consequence of traditional, partly self-serving ways of perceiving oneself. Anyone hoping to change matters has a far more difficult job than he may think.⁹

These attitudes also affect the views Japan have of their cultural indebtedness to China. Of course, it is true that in most cases Japanese transformed Chinese cultural influences in truly creative ways. But all too many Japanese scholars get caught up in asserting their uniqueness and in defensively trying to determine when cultural influences were Japanized. When viewed from the Chinese side, however, Sino-Japanese cultural relations fare even worse. Widespread Chinese ignorance of Japanese cultural history reinforces a different set of widely held views: that Japanese culture does not exist; that it is an inferior, degraded version of Chinese culture; or that, to the extent that it does exist, it was taken wholesale from China. And, only recently has either side recognized that, more often than not, the cultural transmission was mediated by Korea.

The above comments may meet with less than total welcome in some quarters. This can be related to the question of who is saying what is being said. Doubtless it is more palatable to most members of a cultural group for one of its own members to say something unflattering about the group.¹⁰ But what I want to discuss is not how palat-

able or unpalatable certain views may be. What I find disconcerting is any situation where the sole focus, or most of the focus, is on the cultural identity of the speaker and not on what is being said. In my experience, many Chinese simply cannot get beyond identifying some literary interpretation, for example, as being that of a Westerner or a Japanese, and thereby largely or completely avoid coming to grips with the merits or demerits of what is being said. And in Japanese, the clear labeling of a view as being that of a Western outsider is inscribed in the very katakana orthography used, which identifies the source as being alien. Part of what is operative here is a profound self-identification. And, according to my experience, metaphorically speaking, if the cultural self-awareness by Chinese of being Chinese is hundreds, indeed thousands of miles deep, Japanese ethnic-racial-cultural self-awareness should be measured in light years.

If many Japanese are flattered by non-Japanese interest in Japan, many Chinese, I have found, are more indifferent and at the same time set themselves up for some real self-inflicted pain. As noted earlier, the expectation on the part of many Chinese is that work on China by non-Chinese is no good. If, however, it is clear that the work is good, then the reaction, which on occasion I have witnessed, can be this: I, as a Chinese, am ashamed, am humiliated, that this work was not done by a Chinese. I have heard Chinese say this (and mean it) about the Takigawa Kametarō 瀧川亀太郎 edition of the Shih-chi 史記 and certain other Japanese scholarship, about Kalgren's work on Chinese phonology, and even about a volume of my own work. This self-inflicted psychological pain tells us something, I believe, about an aspect of Chinese reverse Orientalism: many Chinese, in a possessive, exclusionist, self-contained way, consider the study of China their bailiwick and theirs alone; and the inward-centeredness of this Chinese cultural world prevents such Chinese from taking active pleasure either in the scholarship itself, in the fact that others are doing work that can redound to the benefit of Chinese and non-Chinese Sinologists alike, or in the fact that such work might increase appreciation of the richness of Chinese culture among non-Chinese. Those of us who happen not to have been born Chinese, however, are in a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation. If you do a lousy job and a Chinese scholar happens to pay attention to your work, you can conveniently confirm the stereotype of how inferior you are in this realm. If you do a fine job, you run the risk of humiliating the person.

I think that, written large, this kind of pride on the part of many Chinese helps explain much of the modern Chinese reaction to the West and even to Japan. If you define the adoption, adaptation, or absorption of something coming from abroad as being "humiliating," then of course you set yourself up for feeling humiliated when that something is adopted, adapted, or absorbed, as has necessarily been

the case frequently in China over the past century and a half. Japanese culture is at something of the opposite end of the spectrum in this regard. Generally speaking, Japanese are not only not humiliated by adapting many things from abroad; they seem to revel in it. It is conceived to be a mode of cultural enrichment, even a tokushoku of Japan.

Edward Said is upset that, historically, Westerners often have not let Orientals (at least Orientals in the Middle East) speak for themselves; rather, Westerners presume to speak for them. At the same time, he specifically disclaims the view that only Blacks can talk with validity about Blacks, only women can talk with authority about women, etc. My own impression is that, despite this disclaimer--inserted perhaps because Said himself is a non-Westerner normally engaged in discourse with Westerners about Western culture, especially Western literature and literary theory--he feels that what Palestinians have to say about Palestine, or Muslims about Islam, has a special, even privileged validity. I think there is an element of having-your-cake-and-eating-it-too in his own praxis.

Said has extended the scope of the subject of his Orientalism to include Oriental peoples other than the one he is a direct member of. For that reason, let us look at East Asia with a view to how Chinese and Japanese speak about and for other Asians. What happens when these Orientals speak for Orientals in general? Specifically, what goes on when a Chinese or Japanese makes the formulation, "We Asians...?"

For one thing, in my experience, Chinese use of the expression is comparatively rare, Japanese use generally more common. In both instances, however, I find it used in the overwhelming majority of cases to extend the scope of some flattering self-image--such as, "We Asians have human feeling"--with the rest of the formulation sometimes stated, but more often not: "Westerners (or, You Westerners) do not have human feeling." In other such formulations, the reference to other Asians is often misleading, debatable at best, or downright wrong. What is ironic, however, is the Japanese formulation for "We Asians..." The two expressions, wareware Tōyōjin 吾々東洋人 and wareware Ajiajin 吾々アジア人, turn on the words Tōyō 東洋 and Ajia アジア. In fact, with comparatively rare exceptions, they do not include Japan in their scope of reference. Tōyōgaku 東洋学, the study of Tōyō, refers to the study of continental East Asia, South-east Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and all other parts of the Islamic world. Thus, the people of Tōyō-land include Chinese, Malays, Turks, and even Moroccans, but not Japanese. The same holds true for Ajia (or Asia) in Japanese; "Asia" does not include Japan. It is only when talking to the gaijin 外人, the white-man outsider (nearly always presumed automatically to have inferior knowledge of Asia), or when patting one's collective self on the back in implicit

contrast with the West, that Japanese extend the scope of the word to include themselves and don the mantle of spokesmen for Asia and Asians, no matter how great their individual ignorance of the history and variety of the rest of Asia. Most Japanese consider themselves apart from continental Asia, superior to it, and in the current formulation, the natural economic (instead of military) leaders of the area. The mindset is directly heir to the pre-World War II "Japanese Orientalism" referred to earlier. It is also a telling example of the Japanese have-you-cake-and-eat-it-too approach to the world: One can both be Asian, even a spokesman for Asians, but also be apart from and superior to Asia and Asians.

The problem of making unwarranted generalizations about Asians, Orientals, and non-Westerners is, of course, by no means limited to Japanese. Otherwise quite intelligent Chinese and Westerners, including Asia specialists, often get terribly muddled when speaking in terms of these cultural dichotomies. In a review of a book entitled Chinese-Western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy (John J. Deeney, ed., Hong Kong, 1980), I noted: "Many of the authors have the annoying habit of indiscriminately drawing a dichotomy between 'East and West,' when by the former they mean either 'China' or 'Asia' or the 'non-Western world.'"¹¹ What I did not say in the review but also noted is that, when speaking for all of Asia in their East-West characterizations, ethnic Chinese contributors to the volume generally not only sounded ignorant of other parts of Asia; they also made the all-too-common mistake of many Asians--that of making their limited corner of it, as they understood it, typical of the whole, huge, varied mass. Western writers in the volume were no better; they, too, mistakenly generalized about Asians from experience with the one area of Asia they knew something about, China.

All of this touches on the enormous problem involved when one tries to make cultural dichotomies. For meaningful contrasts between large cultural groups to be made, my own view is that there is a need for "triangulation." It is not enough to contrast, say, just Japan and the United States. Many of the contrasts that seem unique or special to one or the other society lose their uniqueness with the awareness that a third culture has a still different cultural configuration, and that all three overlap in certain ways. They are all unique. Each is special in its individual mosaic (which at the same time normally includes internally contradictory elements); only rarely is a specific constitutive element that contributes to a general cultural configuration unique.

To make any definitive contrasts between the Western and non-Western worlds, one would have to be both anthropologist and cultural historian for the entire world. To make the distinction between Asians or "Orientals" on the one hand, and Westerners on the other, one would have to have a knowledge of the vastly different, major cultural traditions of Asia, plus considerable learning of the great

Western tradition; to my knowledge no one has even approached having such a background. Even contrasts within East Asia are extremely hard to make, China, Japan, and Korea being just too much to handle. Finally, the whole issue of West/non-West, East/West, and Western world/East Asia dichotomies almost invariably skirts the following important questions: What groups synchronically make up the West, now and in the past? How homogeneous is such an entity, compared with the cultural groups it is being set against? And, how has the West changed diachronically over time? Regarding this last question, standard generalizations about the Western world almost never refer to the very different world or worlds of the pre-Renaissance West.

One reason why "triangulation" helps so much in this type of discussion is that in any mere bipolar contrast, since one element is usually one's own culture, there is an automatic "us" and "them" contrast. When there are three or more points of reference, there is variety to the people making up the "them." Equally important, the discovery should take place that one's own Culture A shares differing similarities with Cultures B and C, while having still different sets of contrasts with these two other cultures. Not only are the complex richnesses of both Cultures B and C highlighted, that of one's own Culture A is thrown into varying relief.

A few concluding remarks are in order. What, if anything, can be done about reverse Orientalism in its various manifestations, as discussed above? Realistically speaking, I do not think much can be. I think it will continue, in a variety of guises, not only for the next several decades but also at least for the next few centuries. It would be hubris to think any outsider or outside group can effect much change in the types of cultural mythology alluded to above.

The West has created its own mishmash called the Orient, but it has also produced a body of scholarship on and understanding of the immensely diverse Orient that is often respectable and sometimes truly outstanding. I am disturbed that this understanding should be ignored or rejected or given an inferior legitimacy because of the "race," national identity, or sex of the person presenting it.

It can be argued that Said misperceives the role of power in Orientalism, at least in some of its recent East and Southeast Asian manifestations. It is not so much that the U.S. government in the past few decades has drawn on Orientalist views to control the region. Rather, the U.S. government has drawn mostly on information supplied by "experts" who, more often than not, are woefully lacking in knowledge of the history, languages, literatures, and customs of the countries they speak about. I think the consequences of this have been grievous. A case can be made, not that Orientalist knowledge has been used too much, but that it has been used too little.

Edward Said has performed a service by making those of us who might be called "Orientalists" reflect on what we are doing, prompting us to question the unconscious assumptions or attitudes we may be bringing to our work. With all due respect, however, I believe the kinds of reverse Orientalism referred to above are every bit as deep-seated, insidious, and potentially harmful to humanity as Said's Orientalism, probably even more so.

Notes

1. Edward Said's book prompted a special symposium section in the May 1980 issue (39.3) of the Journal of Asian Studies. Four scholars wrote articles on the work. In a piece entitled "Orientalism and the Study of Japan," Richard Minear states: "Perhaps European and American ideas about the 'non-Western' world are exceptional only in that during the past several centuries Europe and America have had the power to put them into action" (p. 516). It is ironic that a professor of Japanese history would overlook a major case history in his own backyard.

Anyone familiar with the development of post-Meiji attitudes toward the rest of East Asia knows the depressingly similar quality about statements to China and Korea by such outstanding figures as the following: journalists like Tokutomi Sohō 徳富蘇峰, China scholars like Naitō Konan 内藤湖南, and political figures like Yoshida Shigeru 吉田茂. (Those interested may wish to consult the book-length, English-language studies of these men written, respectively, by John Pierson, Joshua A. Fogel, and John W. Dower).

2. It is gratifying to note that a panel at the 1986 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, entitled "Fantisized Images of Westerners in Modern Japan," was partly devoted to this topic. Abstracts of the papers were published in the ATJ [Association of Teachers of Japanese] Newsletter 9.2 (May 1986), pp. 18-19.

3. I shall not elaborate on the question of how much the experience of growing up as a mid-twentieth-century Chinese or Japanese might help, hinder, or be irrelevant to having any understanding, for example, either of China in the Han or Ming periods or of Japan in the Heian or Muromachi eras.

4. Needless to say, a cultural group's self-image is especially prone to becoming muddled with its projected ideal collective self, with what it thinks it is doing or at least with what it is trying to do (whether or not it is in fact doing it).

5. Note the article by Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, "Proto-Nationalism in Twelfth-Century China? The Case of Ch'en Liang," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 39.2 (December 1979), pp. 403-428.

6. This is true, notwithstanding the fact that part of that scholarship was very much bound up with pre-World War II "Japanese Orientalism."

7. And most who do learn some Japanese do it the lazy way many Chinese do, of trying to read Japanese by using Chinese readings for the characters and mostly fudging on the hiragana squiggles in between. Of course, the more a text is written in modern-style Japanese, the more self-deluding or impossible that way of "reading" the language becomes.

8. One might ask: How many scholars of American literature are willing to learn Chinese or Italian or Czech so as to be able to read treatises on Hawthorne or Melville in these languages? I would reply that certain important distinctions are operative. For one, the analogy is closer to that of a classical scholar in the West who would overlook all classical scholarship in German or English; such is the importance of the body of Japanese scholarship to Sinology. And English is important for China studies, if not for the published material on certain specific topics of research, then simply because it is the international language, especially for much discourse about scholarly disciplines; this is not to mention the reasonably large body of material of English-language material on China, much of which is of high quality. I can well imagine students of American or Chinese literature of some future century also having to learn some form of a Martian or other language for their research because a large enough or important enough body of discourse in their field exists in that language.

9. I have in mind those negotiators who find that Japanese may want open markets for trade around the world, while at the same time drawing a tight, special circle around Japan.

10. It scarcely need be noted that, rightly or wrongly, in contemporary American society comments by non-members about many cultural, ethnic, or racial groups, or about certain gender-related issues, are virtually taboo, whether the comments be generally accurate or not.

11. Journal of Asian Studies 43.2 (February 1984), p. 313. Emphasis added.