

ASIA UNDER WESTERN EYES:
A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF A PROJECTED ARTICLE

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Since this is a very brief presentation today, I will avoid the well-beaten track of postcolonial discourse after Edward Said's *Orientalism* and go back to the beginnings of the imperial era in the early modern period which has only come to a close in Asia at the very end of the twentieth century in Macao. Every schoolboy of my generation knows about Rudyard Kipling's statement on the distinctiveness of the East and the West in his "Ballad of East and West": Oh, the East is East, and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till earth and sky stand presently at God's great judgment seat. This view of things hopes for a meeting and reconciliation at the end of human history before God's great judgment seat. I am more interested in the possibility of East and West meeting in the here and now.

I speak as someone who is a product of a hybrid culture and education. I would find it extremely difficult to carry on a conversation for any length of time with Professor Zhou from Beijing University, as I speak Hokkien to his Mandarin and my best language is in fact English. My children, who are the offspring of a Chinese father and an Indian mother, would find it virtually impossible. They have as their first language this western language that is now the global language called English. Indeed, my elder daughter who is by definition an Easterner was born in Oxford. In my daughters (there are many millions of Asians like them) East and West have in some significant way met in the here and now. I want to start by problematising Kipling's conception of East and West by citing a passage from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison*

Notebooks (Problems of Marxism, 447) in which he talks about the ideas of East and West in our discourse:

To understand exactly what might be meant by the problem of the reality of the external world it might be worth taking up the example of the notions of "East" and "West" which do not cease to be "objectively real" even though analysis shows them to be no more than a conventional, that is "historico-cultural" construction . . .

Obviously East and West are arbitrary and conventional, that is historical, constructions, since outside of real history every point on the earth is East and West at the same time. This is seen more clearly from the fact that these terms have crystallised from the point of view of the European cultured classes who, as a result of their world-wide hegemony, have caused them to be accepted everywhere. Japan is the Far East not only for Europe but also perhaps for the American in California and even for the Japanese himself, who, through English political culture, may then call Egypt the Near East. So because of the historical content that has become attached to the geographical terms, the expressions East and West have finished up indicating specific relations between different cultural complexes. Thus Italians often, when speaking of Morocco, call it an "Eastern" country, to refer to its Moslem and Arab civilisation.

A cursory look at the atlas shows us that Morocco of course sits more to the geographical West than Italy. In this regard, I would like to mention how many Australians refer to themselves as Westerners. I have always found this amusing and have taken this for proof of the theory of continental drift! Christopher Columbus, of course, set out in the fifteenth century to look for Asia by sailing west. He was always convinced that he had landed on the islands off the continent of Asia when he discovered the Caribbean in 1492. I want to look at an engraving of a later explorer than Columbus who gave his name to America, Amerigo Vespucci, to illustrate a point about Europe's, and by extension in later history, the West's view of colonial possessions including Asia. The engraving is a famous print by Johannes Stradanus:

Europe, represented by Vespucci, stands fully clothed, civilised and energetic, thrusting forward across the page from left to right - the direction of our reading of the western languages have conditioned our gaze to scan from Vespucci on the left to the female representation of the New World on the right. The 'New World', and I extend the field of reference to include the colonies that subsequently follow in Asia and elsewhere, is represented by a supine woman, in a state of undress and reclining, fully inviting to the thrusting forward of Europe and the West. Masculine Europe takes possession of a feminised New World. If we turn the engraving the other way round, we see that the energy levels I have been talking about would be somewhat reversed.

The engraving as it stands though illustrates the engagement of the West with the New World and beyond which is cast in the terms of erotic desire so evident in the lascivious gaze of Vespucci. The colonial territory is represented as a willing object of Western desire. In a fuller article, I would have had the opportunity to develop the discussion of colonial encounter as a stereotypical rape of a female or feminised geography. This would be a problematic discussion that needs to be explored as a discourse that turns around so that Europe in the person of a female representative is then depicted as suffering rape or at least the attempt of it. We see this as much in *The Tempest* of Shakespeare as in Forster's *A Passage to India*. Salman Rushdie's question about "who raped whom?" would return us to where we started with Stradanus's depiction of Vespucci.

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