

## CULTURE AGAINST HISTORY? THE POLITICS OF EAST ASIAN IDENTITY

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*This essay examines changes in attitudes toward the question of cultural identity over the last three decades, with particular reference to the quest for an East Asian identity. The question of cultural identity is bound up with the history of EuroAmerican colonialism, which denied to other societies a historical presence of their own. The radical national liberation movements of the 1960s sought to overcome the opposition between "the past" and "the West" by resting their hopes on revolutionary struggles that would create new cultures in the process of the struggle out of present-day realities in which "the past" and "the West" were intertwined inextricably. By contrast, there has been a retreat in recent years into native "traditions," which once again focus on this opposition. The retreat into traditionalism nourishes ethnic and national particularism.*

*The essay proceeds to examine, albeit sketchily, the recent "Confucian revival" in East Asia, and the quest for East Asian or Asian values. It argues that these developments are part of a resurgence of ethnicity that has accompanied globalization, and in many ways are its products. It is the irony of contemporary anti-Eurocentric movements that they themselves are entrapped in the history and geography of Orientalism. In other words, the very effort to counteract Eurocentrism is bound by the categories of a Eurocentric Orientalism. This is further demonstrated by the fact that EuroAmerican theorists have played a crucial part in the articulation of Asian values in their most recent appearance. These have been problems all along, it suggests, in national as well as regional and continental self-definitions in Asia to the extent that Eurocentric assumptions have been internalized in Asian ideas of Asia and Europe. The essay offers a sketchy overview of the history of these ideas by way of illustrating this argument.*

*One of the basic problems that the essay seeks to bring out is the relationship of various approaches to the question of Asian identity to political and social interests. While the Confucian revival and the quest for Asian values have attracted the greatest attention, it suggests, there have been other efforts to approach the question from the bottom up, not in terms of categories of nation, region, and continent, but in terms of the everyday lives of the people in Asia, in which "the past" and "the West" are ever co-present. These efforts, which could be described as efforts within Asian contexts at "globalization from below," have a kinship with earlier national liberation efforts to overcome distinction of Europe and Asia, East and West, or modernity and tradition. They oppose the reification of cultures along inherited spatial or temporal categories, but insist instead on the historicity of cultures. History, employed not to reify culture*

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*in the interests of power, but in the complexity of everyday life, may yet offer, the essay suggests, a way to overcome the sharpening ethnic, national or divisions of our day. It is important for the same reason to recall the approaches to the question of cultural identity of an earlier day, while also recognizing that changing times present new problems.*

I would like to discuss some problems that pertain to the question of an East Asian identity in its relationship to the idea of "the West." I would like to do so by taking a brief detour through changes over the last three decades in attitudes toward culture in the definition of identity. As the problems I raise are by now familiar ones, my goal here is primarily to draw attention to the contrast between contemporary approaches to the question and those that prevailed only a few decades ago, offer some thoughts on change in the world situation that may account for the transformation, and conclude with a few comments on the possibilities offered by a historical perspective to better comprehend contemporary problems that may contribute also to overcoming some of the dilemmas that they present. One of my basic concerns in the discussion is the difference in the perception of "areas" of scholarship among United States scholars of Asia, and "Asian" scholars who find a different meaning in the undertaking that we call "Asian Studies." The questions I take up below, therefore, are not just temporal but spatial as well.

#### THE PAST AND THE WEST, THEN AND NOW

In a book written more than two decades ago, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, the Moroccan intellectual Abdallah Laroui took up a question that he believed to be fundamental to non-Western intellectuals' confrontation with the West: the question of historical or cultural "retardation" (Laroui, 1976). The ascription of native cultural backwardness as an explanation of Western domination presented the native intellectual with a seemingly insuperable dilemma: to escape the past by Westernization, in which case the native intellectual could no longer claim a historical identity of any kind, or to reaffirm the past as the source of identity in resignation to perpetual retardation. Laroui located the crisis to which the title of the book referred in this entrapment between "the West" and the "past." Whatever the solution chosen, the choice condemned the intellectual to alienation from his/her present. As he put it:

Now, there are two types of alienation: the one is visible and openly

criticized, the other all the more insidious as it is denied on principle. Westernization indeed signifies an alienation, a way of becoming other, an avenue to self-division (though one's estimation of this transformation may be positive or negative, according to one's ideology). But there exists another form of alienation in modern Arab society, one that is prevalent but veiled: this is the exaggerated medievalization obtained through quasi-magical identification with the great period of classical Arab culture (Laroui, 1976: 121).

We may observe, further, with the hindsight of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, year published two years later, that these two "alienations" (the liberal and the fundamentalist, respectively) were moreover entangled in Western hegemony insofar as they were premised on representations of Arab culture in Western Orientalism; whether rejected or reaffirmed, the past referred to was a product of Orientalism, now internalized by the Orientals themselves-what I have described elsewhere as "self-Orientalization," and others as "Orientalism in reverse."<sup>1</sup>

Laroui's own answer to the dilemma was a radical Marxist historicism that would reconnect the individual with the concrete present of his/her society:

The historicism we are leading up to, one that is in many respects instrumental, is not the passive acceptance of any past whatsoever and above all not the acceptance of one's own national past; rather, it is the voluntary choice of realizing the unity of historical meaning by the reappropriation of a selective past. This choice is motivated by pragmatic considerations, perhaps, by modesty, above all by nationalism in the most natural sense of the word; the will to gain the respect of others by the shortest possible route. In this perspective, we see clearly that it is not the moderate liberal who is being realistic, for he chooses to believe in the improbable equality of nations. Rather, it is the radical nationalist who is the realist; provided that he affirms his existence, he cares little if he loses his essence (his authenticity) (Laroui, 1976: 99-100).

<sup>1</sup>Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). I referred to the situation Laroui described as "self-Orientalization" in an essay written in response to *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*. See, Arif Dirlik, "Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 13-50, reprinted in Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 23-51. Further elaboration is presented in Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," *History and Theory*, Theme issue 35 (December 1996): 96-118, reprinted in *The Postcolonial Aura*, pp. 105-28. Chatterjee has underlined the importance of self-Orientalization to understanding certain types of nationalism in the Third World. See, Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

The voluntarism suggested by the phrase, "the reappropriation of a selective past," is somewhat misleading, because Laroui's argument in its main thrust suggests that the reappropriation of the past will be part of a process of struggle for existence in the present, a process that involved not just a struggle for national liberation but also a class struggle to overcome alienation within the nation; "praxis," he notes on the same page, "is historicism in action." What he had to say concerning the creation of a new culture through revolutionary praxis had a parallel a decade earlier in Franz Fanon's statement that:

A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people. A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which the people has created itself and keeps itself in existence. A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on (Fanon, 1968: 188).

These were attitudes, I have suggested elsewhere, that were common to the understanding of culture in most national liberation struggles of the late colonial period, from Morocco and Algeria to Cuba and China. They represented a notion of cultural creation that sought to transcend entrapment in the oppositions of "the West" and "the past," or "modernity" and "tradition," by taking their point of departure in a situation where both "the past" and the "West" were inextricable constituents of "the ever-present reality of the people." And what they sought to create was not just a national culture, but a national culture that was part of a greater struggle for freedom and justice (Dirlik, 1997a: 43-44).

National liberation movements are now of the past and, so apparently are the solutions to the question of cultural identity offered by national liberation leaders and theorists from Frantz Fanon to Abdallah Laroui, Ernesto Che Guevara to Mao Zedong. But the question of cultural identity is still very much there; indeed has come to the foreground insistently as it has been divorced from its ties to questions of political economy from which it seemed to be inseparable in earlier, primarily Marxist conceptualizations.

It is also rephrased now in the language of globalization that has replaced modernization as a paradigm of change, but without providing any solutions to either the problems inherited from the past, or the proliferation of

cultural conflict under its regime. While these conflicts endow the question with a new urgency, there are no new answers perceptible on the global cultural horizon. If anything, a cynicism toward the claims of all universalizing solutions has replaced the utopianism of an earlier period, that had been sparked by the end of colonialism, and fueled by hopes that postcolonial regimes (The Third World) could regenerate a universalism that had been betrayed by both capitalism and Soviet-style socialism. The failure of national liberation regimes, a consequence partly of their own failings, including the exaggerated utopian hopes which they invested in themselves, but also due in no small measure to the engineering of global policies designed to guarantee their failure, has resulted in a world-wide retreat from imagining alternatives to the present; while the so-called globalization itself has added new dimensions to the question of cultural identity. Traditions once condemned to the past have made a comeback with a vengeance. The critique of liberal scholarship beginning in the seventies repudiated the modernity-tradition distinction as an issue of Eurocentrism, and such critique lives on in contemporary cultural studies which is even more adamant in repudiating the distinction.

But such critiques seem to be irrelevant to what goes on in the world, where the erstwhile colonized peoples insist on their traditions; this time around not as remnants of the past but with their own claims to modernity. Surely, one of the crucial questions that we must all ask is why, in the midst of globalization, the world is being fragmented in so many ways that few dare to speak these days of universalism, while particularisms of all kinds, including some that were previously unimagined, have assumed such pervasiveness as to define existence universally.

#### CHINA, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE DISAVOWAL OF HISTORY

Laroui acknowledged the direct inspiration in his analysis of the work of Joseph Levenson on the fate of Confucianism in modern China. In his seminal work published in the early 1960s, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, Joseph Levenson argued that Marxist historicism had resolved a problem that had plagued Chinese intellectuals ever since the encounter with the Modern West had forced a parochialization of Confucian values from their universalistic status into the circumscribed endowment of a national past that was inconsistent with the struggle for modernity; a problem he described in terms of a tension between value and history.<sup>2</sup> While not a

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, 3 Vols(Berkeley, CA: University of

Marxist himself, and not particularly sympathetic to the Chinese Revolution, Levenson nevertheless recognized the Communist Revolution in its own right as a historical phenomenon, and sought to understand the source of the appeals of Marxism; which he found in the ability of Marxist historicism to resolve this fundamental tension in Chinese intellectual life by relegating Confucianism into the museum, salvaging Confucius for the nation, but also rendering him irrelevant to the living present. As he put it:

Confucius ... redeemed from both the class aberration (feudal) of idolization and the class aberration (bourgeois) of destruction, might be kept as a national monument, unworshipped, yet also unshattered. In effect, the disdain of a modern pro-Western bourgeoisie for Confucius cancelled out, for the dialecticians, a feudal class's pre-modern devotion. The Communists, driving history to a classless synthetic fulfilment, retired Confucius honorably into the silence of the museum.<sup>3</sup>

It may be one of the profound ironies of our time that this situation has been reversed since Levenson wrote his analysis: Confucius has been brought out of the museum once again, while it is the revolution that is on its way to being museumified; not by feudal worshippers of Confucius, moreover, but by the bourgeoisie who once disdained Confucius. And it is not just the revolution that is at issue. Levenson's analysis, and his evaluation of what the revolution had achieved in resolving the tension between the past and the present, was informed by a teleology of modernity; that the claims of the values of ancient civilizations must inevitably be relegated to the past with the victory of modernity. If the pasts of those civilizations have been resurrected once again, it is not only because of the passing of revolutions, but more importantly the questioning of this teleology that has come to the fore as globalization has replaced modernization as a paradigm of contemporary change.

The passing of the Chinese Revolution, as of socialist revolutions in general, may be attributed to their particular failings. Similarly, advocates of the Confucian revival may attribute the revival to the particular virtues inherent in Confucianism. While there may be something to be said for such views, in my view they suffer from a debilitating parochialism that fails to account for a larger historical context where it is not just socialist revolutions that are relegated to the past but the very idea of revolution, and it is not just the

California Press, 1968). Levenson's work, we might note, was a direct inspiration for Abdallah Laroui's *Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*.

<sup>3</sup>Levenson (1968), Vol 3, *The Problem of Historical Significance*, p. 79.

Confucian tradition that is at issue, but the return of traditions in general. Nor do such views explain attempts to articulate Confucianism to values of entire regions, such as East and Southeast Asia, or of an entire continent, such as Asia.

Further complicating the situation are conflicts that attend these efforts. For all the talk about Asia and Asian values over the last few years, the idea of Asia remains quite problematic, and so do the ideological and cultural sources from which Asian values are to be derived. The most visible competitor to the Confucian revival may be the Islamic revival that has also become visible during this same period; but the period has also witnessed a Hindu revival in India, and right-wing nationalists in Turkey, echoing East Asian nationalists and their EuroAmerican cheerleaders, have resurrected earlier Pan-Turanian utopias to assert that the twenty-first century will be a Turkish century. In other societies in Asia, Buddhism continues to hold sway.

It is difficult to avoid an inference that all these revivals, coinciding temporally, are products of the same world situation, though they obviously have local inflections depending on social context and ideological claims. On the other hand, their differences from one another are quite significant, and feed intra-Asian conflicts that have a variety of sources. In some cases, most notably in the case of Islam but also to some extent the Confucian revival which involves diasporic East Asians (especially Chinese) living outside of Asia, the ideological movements at issue extend beyond continental boundaries, calling into question, this time from a global perspective, anything that we could describe as "Asia" with any sense of concrete referentiality.

A rapidly changing world situation rules out any confident analysis of these developments, but it is still worth thinking through some of the phenomena that have attended their emergence, and their implications for contemporary ideas of East and West. Somehow all this has to do with what is called globalization. But globalization as a paradigm is itself still very much uncertain in its implications. It is at once a description of certain changes at work in reshaping the world, and a new discourse that seeks to perpetuate older hegemonies in a new guise, a reincarnation of United States imperialism, as some would have it.

Whatever its eventual outcome may be, however, it parts ways with the earlier modernization discourse in raising questions about a teleology of modernity that pointed to EuroAmerica as the end of history, and in its assault on the nation as the principal unit of political organization. From different directions, each of these departures from the regime of modernity

may contribute to the emergence of cultural forces that counteract cultural globalization. The dislodging of EuroAmerica from the center of history enables the reemergence of national traditions that were suppressed under the regimes of modernity.<sup>4</sup> The reassertion of national traditions derives additional force from the need to fend off attacks on the nation, which may in fact serve the purposes of the powerful who stand to benefit the most from globalization; not just powerful nations such as the United States, but transnational corporate forces of one kind or another.

The culture industry that is for the most part based in what used to be called the First World but seeks to recruit consumers from around the world, itself contributes in the name of globalization to the reification of national traditions which are commodified and relayed back to the people who claim them, further sharpening boundaries between such traditions. The seemingly benign policies of multiculturalism in the First World, in particular in the United States, owe their origins to the efforts of transnational corporations to accommodate the diversification of producers and consumers that has accompanied the process of transnationalization.<sup>5</sup> While few could object to cultural tolerance, multiculturalism, too, reifies cultural divisions and translates, under adverse situations, into deadly cultural conflict. The shift in concern to ethnic, national, racial and cultural difference also has relegated to the background important questions of class and gender that cut across the boundaries of groups so defined. This shift has much to do with the retreat from revolutionary or radical social imagination which coincides with globalization, and is in some ways a product of the latter.

It seems to me that the search for an Asian, or East Asian, identity, or a national identity within an Asian or an East Asian context, is entangled in this new situation, and is illustrative of its problems, if only because East and Southeast Asian societies in their economic success have contributed more than any other region of the world to the ascendancy of the new paradigm of globalization. I do not mean to imply here that the question of these identities is itself new. The question of national identity has been a perpetual question in East Asia since the beginnings of "Western" domination start-

<sup>4</sup>Akbar S. Ahmed, for example, argues that the postmodernist repudiation of Eurocentric teleology has enabled the resurfacing of non-EuroAmerican traditions (referring, in this case, to Islam) that had been suppressed under the regime of modernity. See, Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992)

<sup>5</sup>See, Arif Dirlik, "The Postmodernization of Production and Its Organization: Flexible Production, Work and Culture," in *The Postcolonial Aura*, pp. 186-219, for the origins of multiculturalist policies in corporate rethinking of management that dates back to the 1960s.



ing in the eighteenth century, and becoming inescapably evident by the nineteenth century, which was to compel a quest for nationhood, and with it, the definition of national identity.

We could even suggest that the problem of national identity, in the case of Japan, even predated contact with the “West,” as Japanese thinkers in the eighteenth century began to raise questions concerning the relationship of Japanese identity to the Confucian ingredients in Japanese culture.<sup>6</sup> An East Asian identity was bound to present itself as a problem when the China-centered world system in East and Southeast Asia broke down politically in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its effects were felt deeply in Qing China, which now found itself relocated from the center of a world long assumed to be the world to the margins of a greater world; marginalized even in its world by the rapidly ascendant Japan. The relationship of national identity to not just the “West,” but to the preceding Confucian world order, was to emerge as a problem during this period in both Korea and Vietnam, mainstays of “the Chinese world order.”

The question of identity nevertheless has a history which has been occluded in much of the recent discussion of East Asian or Asian identities.

I have argued elsewhere that while the Confucian revival may express long-standing grievances against the Eurocentric suppression of East Asian pasts, it has been empowered in its most recent manifestation by the economic success of East Asian societies that were able, therefore, to assert their own cultural prerogatives against Europe and North America.<sup>7</sup> I say “was,”

<sup>6</sup>Harry Harootunian has examined the emergence of “nativism” in Japan in many works. For an extensive discussion, see, *Toward Restoration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup>Arif Dirlik, “Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism,” *Boundary 2*, 22.3 (November 1995): 229-73, and, “Critical Reflections on Chinese Capitalism as Paradigm,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 3(3) (1997): 303-30. The observations below derive mostly from these two articles, which also provide documentation for these observations. Readers may be referred to the sources cited in those articles for documentation. Similar arguments to mine, that the Confucian revival involves issues that are quite contemporary, are to be found in William A. Callahan, “Negotiating Cultural Boundaries: Confucianism and Trans/national identity in Korea,” unpublished paper, and, with reference to Southeast Asia, in C.J.W.-L. Wee, “Framing the ‘New’ East Asia: Anti-Imperialist Discourse and Global Capitalism,” in Salim Rashid, ed., *The Clash of Civilizations?* *Asian Responses* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 75-97. The same volume includes an interesting article by Chaibong Hahm, “The Clash of Civilizations Revisited: A Confucian Perspective” (pp. 109-25), that argues against the deployment of Confucianism in cultural identity politics on the grounds that, as a set of practises rather than a body of doctrine, Confucianism is non-exclusivist, and porous in its boundaries. I am grateful to Dr. Callahan for sharing this paper with me.

because the resurrection of Confucius coincided with a moment of crisis in the global capitalist economy of the late seventies and the eighties, but may be in jeopardy once again, now that the European and American economies have recovered, and it is the Asian economies that find themselves in trouble, calling into question the whole project of globalization, and once again turning miraculous Confucian capitalisms into historically condemned "crony capitalism."

Be that as it may, in its heyday Confucian capitalism served not only to fuel the argument for globalization, but was endowed with the task of salvaging a faltering capitalism. Involved in the promotion of the idea were not just intellectuals from East Asian societies, but perhaps more importantly American intellectuals of East Asian origin, as well as American intellectuals whose relationship to East Asia was exclusively ideological. For some East Asian intellectuals Confucianism had never been dead, needless to say, but it was a global investment of faith in East and Southeast Asian economies that endowed them with a new voice.

It was the same faith that encouraged others to rediscover their Confucianism, and even their Asianness, as in the case, for example, of many Americans of Chinese descent. It was this same faith that played a part in the projection of the newfound success within global capitalism upon Asia as a whole, or the imaginary region of Asia Pacific; leading to brave assertions of a forthcoming Chinese, Asian, or Pacific century. How this will play out remains to be seen. For the time being, Asia as the motor force of the world economy has turned once again into an Asia that requires Western guidance to save it from itself, or even an Asia that may be a threat to global order.

All this suggests one thing: that even at the moment of a seeming assertion of an autonomous self against the West, the West has been very much part of an Asian self-discovery either as an active or an absent presence. United States policy theorizers from Herman Kahn to John Berger to Samuel Huntington played a direct part in the theorization of Confucian or Neo-Confucian culture as a dynamic force in the emergence of East and Southeast Asian economic vitality. They also provided theorists of East Asian origin with theoretical legitimacy. At the same time, the West, and an urge to overcome a century of humiliation at Western hands, has been very much on the minds of advocates of an East Asian or Asian revival among those intellectuals who themselves hail from those regions.

Most importantly, the geography of Asian revival has been informed very much by the geography of Orientalism. It is no coincidence that the revival has expressed itself in terms of geographical regions that were in the first

place products of EuroAmerican spatializations of Asia in Orientalist scholarship and, subsequently, the area studies of post World War II vintage that were informed by the global strategic interests of the United States.

## BEYOND ORIENTALISM

It may be possible to suggest that East Asia (and parts of Southeast Asia) has a cultural reality beyond the constructs of Orientalism. Scholars of Asia and East Asia, especially in the United States, in their enthusiasm to deconstruct the legacies of Orientalism and area studies, have been too quick to reject as mere hegemonic “inventions” earlier mappings of those areas—which contrasts with the continued preoccupation of those who inhabit Asia or East Asia with their own separate identities. It is also arguable, as in the case of the nation, that United States scholars’ attacks on these earlier mappings serves certain interests better than others; and renders it impossible for those who inhabit those regions to assert autonomous identities against a hegemonic globalization driven by United States power, that might offer cultural alternatives to the EuroAmerican modernity (or postmodernity) that continues to inform prevailing visions of globality.<sup>8</sup>

Inventions or not, these areas are products of legacies that endow them at the least with a *historical* reality. That the relationships between societies in Asia or East Asia have produced as much difference as commonality, or have been marked by intra-Asian conflict and colonialism, does not render these areas into any less of a culture area. After all, deadly conflicts between European societies have not prevented Europeans from claiming a common heritage based on origins in classical civilizations, or the legacy of the Enlightenment. We may note that the idea of Europe, too, has been called into question by some (not to speak of a unitary entity called “the West,” that lumps together Europe and North America, or the Americas in general).<sup>9</sup> But it is nevertheless remarkable that questionings of the “West” or of Europe do not seem to attract the same intensity of attention as the deconstruction of other culture areas—possibly due to the immense influence of postcolonial criticism.

The problem may not be whether or not there are culture areas in Asia or

<sup>8</sup>I have argued this point at greater length in Arif Dirlik, “No Longer Far Away: The Reconfiguration of Global Relations and Its Challenges to Modern Asian Studies,” in Leo Douw, ed., *Unsettled Frontiers and Transnational Linkages: New Tasks for the Historian of Modern Asia* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1997), pp. 19-32.

<sup>9</sup>For an interesting discussion by a distinguished historian, see, J.G.A. Pocock, “Deconstructing Europe,” *History of European Ideas*, 18.3 (1994): 329-45

East Asia, but more importantly that these areas have been defined from the outside, in accordance with EuroAmerican interests and perceptions, rather than in accordance with the historical logic embedded in local interactions and cultural formations. Distinctions between East, Northeast or Southeast Asia, as well as any clear delineations between those areas, as well their relationships to the rest of Asia, may represent above all the realities of EuroAmerican power and imagination, but that does not mean that the regions could not be defined differently, with due attention to the porosity of the boundaries that divide one region for another.<sup>10</sup> In terms of long-standing historical exchanges, as well as common textual traditions, it is possible to speak of a region that encompasses both East and Southeast Asia, linked in turn to other parts of Asia through commercial and intellectual exchanges. After all, elites in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan did draw on the same classical and sacred texts and the institutions they implied, even though those texts were articulated to local circumstances to produce different historical trajectories. It is important to remember also that until just about a century ago, these texts were perceived not so much as the products of one national entity (China), but as sacred texts of universal relevance—much the same as the Greek/Roman classics, or the Bible, might have been perceived by Europeans.

Equally important are relationships of economic exchange, but especially of the motions of populations, that would contribute to the formation of East and Southeast Asia as a world-system unto itself, but also a culture area as well. Once again, it was populations from the country we now know as China that played a strategic part in these relationships, but it was not until the twentieth century that these populations thought of themselves as being “Chinese,” rather than as descendants from some locality within that political ecumene.<sup>11</sup> Migrants from China themselves assimilated to local conditions, but in the process they also played a part in the diffusion of social/economic practises, as well as of ideas, in the whole region (Salmon (ed.), 1987). It is important to remember also that these exchanges and motions of populations took place increasingly within the context of an expanding European world-system, and cut across regional boundaries within Asia, connecting East Asia with places as far as Africa, Australia, and

<sup>10</sup>Hence it is arguable, in terms of the “areas” of area studies scholarship, that the inhabitants of these regions at all times belonged to more than one area; in other words, that the very notion of “area” is overdetermined. I owe this insight to the comments on an earlier version of this paper by Prof. Paik Nak-chung.

<sup>11</sup>I use the term “ecumene” here advisedly, in order to avoid projecting onto the past the nationalist claims of the present.

the Pacific.

Asian modernities were to contribute further to the growth of regional consciousness, and endow it with new meanings. This is readily visible in the appearance of Pan-Asian ideologies in the twentieth century. The ideology of an Asian identity, Pan-Asianism, dates back to the late nineteenth century, and coincided, ironically, with the emergence of national consciousness in one Asian society after another during the same period. East Asians did not realize that they lived in Asia until they saw themselves so located in maps from Europe; the term "Asia" was introduced into Chinese by Jesuits in the seventeenth century, but there is little indication that this made much of an impression on the Chinese until the nineteenth century, when world geography acquired an urgent importance in efforts to understand the new world into which China, and East Asia in general, were drawn inexorably.

The geography of imperialism, ironically, also shaped the geography of resistance to it. Radical nationalists from various societies, circulating around Asia in search of ideas, funds and constituents for their nation-building efforts, through their encounters became aware of the common plight of their societies-and their "Asianness"-which would produce a common radical discourse around the idea of Asia. Tokyo, which around the turn of the century played a part for Asian intellectuals comparable in many ways to London for radical European intellectuals, was a magnet for radical Asian intellectuals in search of modernity from India to Vietnam, China, Korea and the Phillipines.<sup>12</sup> Guangzhou (Canton) served in the 1920's as the capital of Asian radicalism(known by the mid-twenties as the "Paris Commune of Asia"), and in the Guangzhou Uprising of 1927, radicals from Vietnam, Korea and Japan fought side-by-side for the revolutionary transformation of Asia. In the 1920s and 1930s, the practises and ideas of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey and of Mohandas Gandhi in India left a deep impression on radicals as well as conservatives in China and Japan. Japanese imperialism in the 1930s found legitimation among many Asians in its claims to defend Asia against "Western" imperialism, bourgeois or Communist. The same quest goes on in our day in the appeals to "Asian" or "East Asian" values against EuroAmerican domination.

If there is a historical reality to Asia or East Asia, however, claims to East Asian identity call for strategies of analysis different from those that have been employed in discussions such as those that have accompanied the

<sup>12</sup>For an examination of these encounters around the turn of the twentieth century, see, Rebecca Karl, "Secret Sharers: Chinese Nationalism and the Non-Western World at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Duke University (1995).

Confucian revival. The need is for strategies of analysis that not only factor in historical conflicts, modern nationalisms that expressed themselves in renunciation of this common legacy, and intra-East Asian imperialism, but also existence of intellectual and popular traditions that provided alternatives to the so-called Confucian tradition, and also divided these societies from one another. Where does Confucianism stop and Taoism and Buddhism begin? How does Shinto play into Japanese Confucianism, or Shamanic practises into Korean? How do popular traditions come into a definition of these societies in terms of Confucian culture? We may have no farther to go than the current popularity in China of the *Falun gong* against a regime that seeks to bolster its faltering socialist legacy with Confucian homilies to illustrate that Confucianism by no means suffices in the cultural definition of China — much less East Asia — but is, on the contrary, bound up with state and class interests against other possible cultural definitions of China. These complexities have been absent from discussions of Confucian China, or a Confucian East Asia, which have engaged instead in a cultural reification not only of entire societies but of an entire region that coincides suspiciously with Orientalist cultural geographies.

Claims to Asia and Asian values provide an even more egregious illustration of the legacy of Eurocentric Orientalism in their suppression not only of regional differences, but also of differences of class and gender. Such claims often betray a preference for the past over the present of Asia, drawing upon supposed cultural legacies that distinguish “Asia” from “Europe.” In such cases, “Asia” has been interpreted to confirm the prejudices of the most confirmed EuroAmerican Orientalists; as the location that is the “Other” of Europe. The “otherness” has resorted to different kinds of vocabulary depending on historical circumstances, but what most appeals to Asianness share in common is a reification of Asia, that is often accompanied by an Occidentalism that is hardly distinguishable from Orientalism.

A prominent representative of this position in the early part of the century was the Indian poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore, who drew upon a distinction in European Orientalism to promote the idea of a spiritual Asia against a materialistic West.<sup>13</sup> Tagore’s ideas were echoed in China in the 1920s by those who contrasted the “spiritual” civilization of the East against the “material” civilization of the West. Such distinctions live on in the pre-

<sup>13</sup>Tagore’s influence in East Asia, and the problematic of Pan-Asianism, has been examined by Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). I have discussed the circulation in Asia of European Orientalists’ ideas of Asia in “Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism,” *History and Theory*, Theme issue 35 (December 1996).

sent in claims to a “Confucian” or “Islamic” Asian civilizations that apparently retain their spirituality in spite of all signs of success in capitalist economies. Asians with their “spiritual” legacies, it seems, conquer all odds to preserve their “culture” against the onslaught of the “West.” That such a position denies history to Asia, much in the Orientalist mode, goes without saying. But it also disguises immense differences in ethnic, class and gender experiences of modernity; and, in the process of asserting an Asian identity against an imagined “West,” has oppressive implications of its own when it comes to differences within “Asia.”<sup>14</sup>

There has been a predicament built into Pan-Asianism all along that has derived from a confounding of national aspirations with continental ascriptions; appropriating supposedly continental characteristics for national ends, while also projecting upon the continent what were taken to be national characteristics. The instability of the idea has been manifested in the course of the twentieth century in the diametrically opposed uses to which it has been put. Pan-Asian solidarity could motivate common revolutionary struggles, as it did in China in the twenties and thirties when Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese radicals fought side by side with the Chinese in a revolutionary struggle that would liberate not only China, but also launch the liberation of Asia as a whole. Pan-Asianism could also justify, and even legitimize, intra-Asian imperialism where one society could take it upon itself to liberate all of Asia from Western (and Communist) imperialism, in the process subjecting other Asian societies to its domination — as in the case of Japanese imperialism in the thirties and forties.<sup>15</sup>

If Europeans created the idea of Asia, they served also as midwives to the birth of Pan-Asianism, which has been an added source of instability in the comprehension and uses of Pan-Asianism. Changing relationships to the “West,” the context for both Asia and Pan-Asianism, has played a part in shaping the relationships of societies in Asia to one another, and to the idea of Asia. Having created the notion of Asia in the first place, EuroAmerican involvement in Asia has repeatedly exposed the illusoriness of pretensions

<sup>14</sup>For further discussion, in reference to a radical “asian” rejection of “history,” see, Arif Dirlik, “Reading Ashis Nandy: The Return of the Past or Modernity With a Vengeance,” in Vinay Lal, ed., *Dissenting Knowledges, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Nandy’s radical rejection is based on the fact that “the West” is an intimate part of Asian consciousness and is not to be repudiated, therefore, except through a “decolonization” of consciousness.

<sup>15</sup>For a recent study of the part played by Pan-Asianism in Chinese nationalists’ compromise with Japanese imperialism during World War II, see, Hwang Dongyoun, “Wang Jingwei, The Nanjing Government, and the Problem of Collaboration in World War II China,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Duke University (1999).

to continental consciousness. It is important to remember here that the first "Asian" nations to qualify for admission into modernity according to its gate-keepers, Turkey and Japan at the two extremities of Asia, qualified for the admission to the new world order by "escaping from Asia," Japan in the late nineteenth century, and Turkey after the Ataturk reforms after 1923. It is equally instructive to remember that "escaping Asia," while qualifying these societies for candidacy for this new world order, has not meant actual admission into the ranks *per se*, as their "Asianness" still handicaps them, for all their efforts, from becoming "Western." And that, in spite of the fact that Japan proved itself as capable of imperialism against its Asian neighbors as any power from the "West," and Turkey enthusiastically entered the War in Korea to prove that it was on the side of the good guys against bad Asians!

The very idea of "Asia," then, has the West as an inextricable constituent. In the words of the prominent Indian thinker, Ashis Nandy, whose influential works have consistently drawn attention to the fact that the West is no longer an outside to Asia and Asians, but is very much internalized in the Asian self-consciousness:

Asia is a geographical, not cultural entity. Though many Asians have defined their continent culturally during the last 150 years, that definition can be read as an artefact of Asian reactions to Western colonialism rather than as a search for larger cultural similarities ... cultural definitions of Asia have been mainly a psychological defence against the internalized imperial fantasy of the continent as a location of ancient civilizations that had once been great and were now decadent, decrepit and senile ... <sup>16</sup>

The search for East Asian or Asian identity as exemplified by the Confucian revival does not represent the only response to Eurocentrism, or a search for alternatives to it. Postcolonial discourse in our day, in contrast to earlier days of national liberation, would seem to be obsessed with the problem of exorcizing the EuroAmerican ghost that has become part of a global legacy. The exorcism seems to take different forms according to political and cultural disposition. The search for an East Asian or Asian identity would seem to be most favored by those who have never given up on those traditions, but also by states and capital who perceive in those traditions not only a means of self-identification, but also a means to keeping in check the

<sup>16</sup>Ashis Nandy, "A New Cosmopolitanism: Toward a Dialogue of Asian Civilizations," in Chen Kuan-hsing, ed., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 142-49, p. 142.



disorganizing effects of success in the capitalist economy without questioning capitalism as such. Their orientation coincides with the urgent need felt by large sectors of the population (as in the case of China, for example) for some sense of national identity in the face of cultural globalization—i.e., the invasion of local cultures by the technology of global consumption culture. The latter, in turn, plays up local cultures and traditions as part of global marketing strategies, producing ethnic and national cultures even as it draws all societies into the seemingly irresistible, and inexhaustible, vortex of a market culture.

Others, mostly cosmopolitan intellectuals of a critical bent, who are quite aware not only that national cultures themselves are products of the history of EuroAmerican modernity, but also that the reification of national culture itself provides occasion for oppression within and aggression without, point to ambivalence and ambiguity if not as a solution to anything, at least as a way of avoiding the harm done by cultural reification at the national, regional or global level. As one such intellectual writes, with reference to a text produced by a Korean American:

I believe that the ambivalence in this text is irreducible. This is because, on the one hand, the need to fight against imperialist oppression — which may well require manufacture in the future of the national community as the subject of resistance — is far from diminished in the world today, and, on the other hand, the homogenization of the national community could too often lead to the tremendous victimization of those who are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous. However unbearable it may be, the text seems to say, we have to live with this ambivalence (Sakai, 1997: 39).

Ambivalence here arises from a recognition of the aporia presented by cultural choice, or even the definition of culture as such. The very notion of “ambivalence” has acquired currency in recent years as an antidote to cultural reification and bigotry. On the other hand, there is no way of avoiding a sense that it is also an expression of hopelessness, and, even more seriously, that it betrays an obliviousness to a historical situation in which the ambiguity of texts and the ambivalence of intellectuals may be out of step with proliferating demands for identity.

A third option, perhaps most appealing to activist intellectuals who continue to believe in the possibility of radical transformation, is the option of dialogue from the bottom up; dialogue among Asian intellectuals from different locations within Asia, that seeks nevertheless to avoid national, regional or continental reifications of culture. In some ways, this option rep-

resents the transportation to Asian locations of what has been called “globalization from below.” It is non-exclusive in the sense both of refusing to draw a wedge between “east” and “west,” but also in recognizing common problems that unite many in Asia with populations elsewhere, from Africa to Latin America to Europe and North America.

A representative sampling of this position is to be found in the volume, *Trajectories*, where the editors and the various contributors self-consciously take up positions that acknowledge the legacy of earlier radicalisms, without trying to avoid the recognition of new problems that have emerged with changing times. What may be most important in the undertaking, as one of the contributors puts it, is a recognition of the pathologies both of a Eurocentric domination of the world, and those of Asian societies themselves, which have become inextricable from one another over the history of modernity (Nandy, 1998: 147). The point is how to overcome these pathologies without entrapment in oppositions that are no longer relevant. Overcoming the colonial legacy of modernity as well as the destructive consequences of globality requires attention to life at the everyday level, where the various strands of the past and the West are intertwined to form many local cultures that are rendered invisible in notions of culture that are incapable of looking past continent, region or nation.

## GLOBALIZATION AND THE CONQUEST OF THE THIRD WORLD

Globalization discourse has revealed contradictions within Eurocentrism more explicitly than ever before, and allowed for the resurfacing of traditionalist discourses that question EuroAmerican claims to modernity. But this does not mean the end of Eurocentrism. Ien Ang in a recent article argues cogently the persistence within Europe of assumptions to European superiority, which is expressed in a persistent self-image of Europe as the savior of the world (Ang, 1998). I have already noted that globalization itself is in many ways a rephrasing of United States economic and cultural hegemony, and serves as an excuse for exporting worldwide American economic, political and cultural practises. Even multiculturalism serves to contain cultural difference in a manner consistent with those practises.

I am more interested here, however, in the persistence of Eurocentrism in more insidious ways even in the rejection of Eurocentrism. This is what I have argued above with regard to the Confucian revival of the last two decades, and the quest for East Asian or Asian values, which, for all their efforts to assert autonomous values against the hegemony of Eurocentrism, are marked nevertheless by the temporalities and spatialities of a

Eurocentric conceptualization of the world. This is evident also in the re-interpretation of so-called Confucian or Asian values to accord with the demands of capitalism, with all its developmentalist premises, which goes unquestioned in much of the discussion.

In fact, some critics of Eurocentrism in Europe and North America have sought in recent years to divorce capitalism from EuroAmerican modernity, making it into an endowment of Asian societies as well, which raises questions concerning EuroAmerican claims to modernity, and may be complementary to non-European societies which are now demonstrated to have had the same potential for development as modern Europe. What is less noticed is that this kind of revisionism re-writes the history of the world after the model of EuroAmerican capitalist modernity; in the process making capitalism into a fate of humankind globally that erases alternatives to EuroAmerican capitalist modernity to be found in these different historical traditions. It is in many ways a Eurocentrism with a vengeance.<sup>17</sup> Eurocentrism casts its shadow even on those attempts to escape its legacy as in the radical efforts to overcome both Eurocentrism and Asia-centrism to which I referred above; for EuroAmerican institutions are quick to insinuate themselves into any dialogue even between non-Western radicals; as in the case of a forthcoming conference intended to discuss “Asian” paradigms in the study of Asian societies, which is funded, according to the announcement, by the Ford Foundation!

Does this mean that Eurocentrism is a historical prison-house from which

<sup>17</sup>Andre Gundar Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). An earlier Eurocentrism thrived by denying the part others had played in European development. Gundar Frank does succeed in overcoming this denial; where he errs is in failing to distinguish the contributions of other economies to European development from a global economic trajectory. The result is to project upon a global past the teleology of modern capitalist development. We might suggest that a similar problem dogs efforts to assert an Asian mode of development, which takes modern capitalism for granted, while insisting on the role “Asian values” have played in shaping it. Not only do such views take for granted a teleology of modern capitalism, but they also resonate with an earlier Eurocentrism’s disavowal of history, this time by taking the “West” out of the historical picture. What we seem to have presently is a current replay of old ideas about diffusionism (by land, or by sea), versus an immanent universalism that is reminiscent of a Stalinist Marxism according to which each society in its own way moved along a path that was predetermined by the natural progression of human societies. What has been lost in the process is the other, more historically informed, Marxist attention to contradictions, the possibility of alternative paths, and how teleologies are constructed by suppression of alternatives. I have discussed the issues raised here at far greater length in “History Without A Center? Reflections on Eurocentrism,” in Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedict Stuchtey, eds., *Histriographical Traditions and Cultural Identities in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, forthcoming).

there is no exit? This may be a self-defeating way of posing a question that could be phrased differently: does the repudiation of Eurocentrism require a denial of the historical role played by European and American societies, which in many ways also constitutes a denial of history to the society of the self? It is this denial that issues either in unconscious slippage into Eurocentrism by writing world history along the paradigms and problems that are products of the EuroAmerican organization of the world in the first place, or in escapes into traditions that became conscious of themselves as traditions in the face of EuroAmerican cultural negation of alternative pasts.

It makes much more sense, under the circumstances, to historicize both Europe and societies of the self, to recognize that while EuroAmerican modernity may have been a product of a particular conjuncture in history, the forces unleashed by this modernity — from capitalism to the Enlightenment, the nation-state to colonialism — nevertheless had a transformative role globally. This transformative role needs to be distinguished from global homogenization, as it was articulated at all times through a dialectic of the global and the local, but it was transformative nevertheless. Any consideration of alternative futures, therefore, needs to take its point of departure not in some premodern past, which may be unknowable except through its textual traces, but through present realities in which, to recall Laroui, pasts and Wests are ever co-present in constantly shifting configurations. To take recourse to the past or the West as if they were entities frozen forever in time is to refuse the dialectic that endows the terms with their historical meanings; perhaps even to freeze them so as acquire some control over the direction of history. But, if I may recall a fundamental insight of Marxism, any effort to act in history in order to have some say over the future, requires not the denial but the recognition of historicity; in Laroui's words, "praxis as historicism in action." We need not subscribe to any Marxist, or modernist, teleologies to acknowledge the importance not only of recognizing the historicity of the past and the present, but the historicity of our own efforts to intervene in the process, or even to write about it, which may be a different form of intervention. The idea of Asia or East Asia seems to provide the location for such intervention presently, if only because these ideas are open to egregious misinterpretation and abuse.

#### EAST ASIAN ALTERNATIVES?

The question presently is not whether or not there is an Asia or East Asia, but more a question of who is to define what Asia or East Asia may repre-

sent. It is a question that involves not only EuroAmerican perceptions of Asia but, even more importantly, intra-Asian approaches to the question. Young-seo Baik in a recent essay describes “Asia” or “East Asia” as an “intellectual praxis” (Baik, 1999). Asia, the place that we assume to be there when we speak or write of it, is indeed a product of our imaginings, which we produce even as we take it as the point of departure for the production. It makes equal sense to speak of “Asia” or “East Asia” as discourses that produce their objects, not out of thin air, but in endowing those terms with different historical meanings. Asia or East Asia, in other words, are not merely geographical entities that provide us with stable objects of research or politics, but projects to be realized, that may offer alternatives to EuroAmerican modernity as we have known it. The confusion of East Asia as legacy and project lies at the basis of much misrepresentation in contemporary discussions of “Asian values,” which render into legacies of the past what are but mostly conservative responses to contemporary cultural transformations. There is a glaring contradiction between such cultural claims that reproduce Orientalist readings of Asia and East Asia (what I described above as “self-Orientalization”), and the evidence of daily cultural transformation. East Asia as legacy imprisons the inhabitants of the region in an imagined cultural endowment. Recognizing East Asia as a project (or as “intellectual praxis” or discourse) offers possibilities not only of distinguishing the political agenda that inform different readings of Asia, but also of redefining the region so as to account for it as a historical, not an unchanging cultural entity.

It seems to me that this project, if it is to be meaningful in a contemporary sense, has to address problems not just of the region, but contemporary problems in general. It is especially important in this regard to keep in mind not just the arbitrariness of regional or national divisions, but also the social divisions and complexities that are disguised in appeals to cultural difference. The idea of East Asia may be meaningful only if it is articulated to contemporary problems of globality, and offers solutions to problems of economic and political justice that have their point of departure in a present reality, a reality which is a product both of the “past” and the “West.” Thus conceived, East Asia as a project also calls for a re-writing of the past, not as it has been re-written in nationalist historiographies, but with an eye to what East Asian historical experiences of culture and politics may have to reveal by way of alternatives to contemporary norms of national and international organization. Merely to claim a cultural identity against the “West” is no longer sufficient, not only because the “West” is already an inextricable part of East Asia, but also because such claims may only serve

to perpetuate social injustices and oppressions in a new cultural guise.

A radical vision of East Asia needs to recognize that the modernity to be transcended is no longer just a “Western” but an East Asian modernity. Indispensable to such a vision is the repudiation of the region as defined top-down in the interests of power; not just EuroAmerican power but also of the structures of national and social power internal to the region. If the idea of East Asia or, for that matter any other region, is to be meaningful in a transformative sense, it needs to be grounded in a reconceptualization of the very notion of regional formations — from the bottom up, in accordance with everyday needs and interactions that point to diverse historical experiences and trajectories, which have been rendered invisible in both Orientalist and nationalist mappings of the world. Modernity’s historiography has organized the past around imagined culture areas, civilizations or nations which turn out upon closer examination to be products of the prerogatives of power of one kind or another. It is about time that we rethought regions in their historicity, as they are produced in translocal and transnational alliances of everyday struggles for survival and meaning, which may or may not coincide with the geographies of colonialism, or its localized expressions in coercive nationalisms.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>I suggested above that claims to regional culture (be it Asia, or East Asia) often serve nationalist yearnings, where supposed national characteristics are projected upon entire regions and continents. Interestingly, the opposite can also be the case, as there are built-in contradictions between regionalism and nationalism. Europe offers instructive examples. As the European Union has taken shape, there have been proliferating assertions of local cultural identities against nation-states, as in the case of Catalonian identity, or the demands of Corsicans for linguistic independence from France—which the French Minister of Culture described in a recent interview as the “Balkanization” of France (CNN Report, Seoul, Korea, 29 September 1999). A regional perspective, in other words, may empower the expression of local cultural differences against nationalist homogenization, just as globalization on a world scale empowers the “return” of “forgotten” traditions. I venture to suggest here that similar results would ensue were there to be an “East and/or Southeast Asian Union,” which would offer a different frame of reference (and legitimacy) than that of the nation-state.

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