Fantasy and Reality in the West’s Response to Asia: An Historical Review

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Many years ago, as a young student at West Virginia University, I first learned from my teachers about the revolutionary impact of the West upon the traditional cultures of Asia. The question of how Asia had affected the West throughout history strangely seemed to be missing from these considerations. With all the optimism and hope of youth, I then determined that I would study the impact of Asia upon the West. To date, some fifty years after embarking upon this project, I continue working on a multi-volumed series of books entitled Asia in the Making of Europe. So far I have published five books on the period down to 1600 A.D., as well as a few separate studies on aspects of later history. At the moment I have in press several books on the seventeenth century. In what follows I shall try to give you a few of my thoughts about the contradictions which appear throughout history between the West’s perception of Asia as a world of fantasy or of reality.

The terms “Europe” and “Asia” are both concepts of European origin which have undergone redefinition ever since they were first employed as geographical destinations. It was from the Europeans that the nations and peoples of Asia learned that they belong to Asia. They always thought of themselves, as they still do, as being Chinese, Japanese, Tamils, Sinhalese, etc. Those lands which lay to the east of the Levant began to impinge themselves upon the consciousness of the Greeks during the Homeric age (pre-eighth century). Several centuries had to pass before the Greeks came to realize that a real place called India lay in the mists beyond the Persian empire. Reports from Greek servitors of the Persians first brought India into the Greek tradition as a remote land of gold peopled by fabulous creatures who were divided into many nations and language groups with curious and diverse customs. Interlarded between these many fantastic stories were bits and pieces of factual information which became the building blocks on which Europe’s conception of the India of reality was erected.

The latitude of fantasy and reality were markedly broadened by Alexander the Great’s campaign in northern India during 326 to 323 B.C. The companions of Alexander the diplomat Megasthenes (early 3rd century B.C.) produced in pre-Christian times the classical delineation of India which was to be the backdrop for most presentations of India prepared before the fifteenth century. Northern India was portrayed in their accounts as a definite geographical location which enjoyed a high level of political, cultural, and social development. Megasthenes understood in principle the nature of the caste system and stressed the role of the “philosophers” (Brahmans and ascetics) as the most respected class in Indian society. Although he knew no native language, Megasthenes tried to understand the rites and ideas of the “philosophers” and correctly concluded that the Brahmans possess a “dogmatic system” of thought. The Greeks knew south India only by report and were content to place the fabulous peoples and the tales of marvel in its Pandyan kingdom.

Commercial relation further extended the Greek view of India, even though most trade was conducted by intermediaries. Shortly before the beginning of the Christian era, Greek and
Egyptian sailors learned to use the monsoons and to sail directly across the open sea from Arabia to India. Merchants from India occasionally could be seen in Alexandria in pre-Christian times. Eratosthenes, the librarian at Alexandria from ca. 234 to 196 B.C. began to incorporate India into his picture of the world. In his Geographica he clearly showed the peninsular character of the sub-continent. Later geographers were to use Eratosthenes depiction of the known world, including India, as the starting point of their discussions.

The extension of Roman control over the Mediterranean basin and the Red Sea littoral shortly before the beginning of the Christian era resulted in the elimination of commercial middlemen and permitted the resumption of direct trade with India. Until A.D. 300 Antioch was the entrepot for Eaten wars that came to the Levant over the land route and Alexandria remained the mart for Eastern goods carried by sea. The trade in luxury wars from the East was sufficiently important to make the Roman moralists complain about the drain of precious metals from the empire. The Romans imported large quantities of silk from China as well as textiles, spices, and exotica from India, Geylon and other parts of Asia. The overland trade, predominantly in silk, extended the horizons of Europe beyond India to China, known in the Latin world as “Serica” or the “land of silk”. Roman commercial mission reached China by sea in the second and third centuries, but travel in the Indian Ocean thereafter became dangerous for Europeans and direct maritime trade ceased.

While the material products of the East became more common in the Graeco-Roman world, Indian ideas and stories began to have new appeal. Disenchantment with Greek rationalism in the first three centuries of the Christian era led to the growth of otherworldliness in Hellenistic thought. Previously puzzled by Indian asceticism, the “philosophers” of Europe began to believe that the eastern thinkers possessed secret methods of attaining a closer and purer knowledge of the divine. The Neo-Platonists evolved a mystical doctrine of union between the individual and the supreme spirit which resembles the teachings of the Upanishads. The Persians Mani’s knowledge of Indian Buddhism led him to include the Buddha in his pantheon of divine emissaries. The Manichean movement, proscribed by Diocletian ca. 296, owed a debt as it evolved to Indian ascetic methods, practices, and idea, particularly in the role assigned to the Elect. In the fourth century the popularity of Manicheanism and its ascetic practices in the empire stimulated, in turn, the rise of the Christian monasticism and asceticism that became so vital to medieval religiosity.¹

The establishment of Constantinople in 300 initiated a radical transformation of the Roman Empire and had the effect of isolating its western sector form contact with the Levant and Asia. The interposition of Byzantium and with middlemen led in the western empire to a steep rise in the prices of Eastern commodities, especially the cherished spices. Inauguration of silk production in Byzantium in the sixth century broke the Eastern monopoly and led to the spread of the silk industry throughout Mediterranean Europe. The decline of Rome as the administrative and economic center of the empire was accompanied by the rise of localism in Europe’s government and economy. In the seventh and eighth centuries Christian Europe itself began to

suffer invasions from the forces of Islam—just about one thousand years after Alexander had invaded India!

Around the year 600 the world was in process of dividing into relatively insulated sectors. The dynamic element was Islam, the newest of the world’s great religions. Its followers had expanded their control by 732 over a vast area stretching from the Indus to central France and embracing under their banner Persia, the Levant, north Africa, and Spain. In India the Gupta empire had vanished by 550 before the onslaughts of invaders from the north. Despite efforts to revive central control the subcontinent, like Europe, fell to pieces as lesser princes engaged in continual warfare to hole their own lands or to take those of their neighbors. China, which had previously suffered prolonged disunion and internal and external weakness, was the only sector of the medieval world to defend itself successfully against foreign incursions. In 618 the T’ang dynasty restored political unity to the country and presided for nearly three centuries over one of the most prosperous and culturally brilliant eras in Chinese history. Japan, not yet part of Europe’s known world, was then inaugurating under the inspiration of T’ang culture its own classical period.

In each major sector of the Eurasian world religion was the cement that held society together: Confucianism in China, Hinduism in India, Islam in its world, and Christianity in Europe. Buddhism, which had virtually disappeared in India, flourished in Ceylon, Southeast Asia, China, and Japan as a foreign import in competition with native and local faiths. Relatively speaking, Byzantium and western Christendom were the least able of all these sectors to protect themselves from external invasions or to restore internal unity and order. From 300 to 1300 Christian Europe learned very little about what was happening outside its own borders. The myths and facts of antiquity relative to Asia were lost, Christianized, embellished with biblical allegories and new geographical fantasies. As the bible increasingly became Europe’s geographical source book, Asia was frequently designated as the locale of the terrestrial paradise, the Garden of Eden, or Gog and Magog. Most medieval world pictures (maps) divided the known world into three parts—Asia, Africa, and Europe—with Asia equal in size to the combined areas of Europe and Africa. The idea was firmly implanted in medieval Europe, perhaps by the geographer Ptolemy, that Asia, particularly India, was larger and richer than Europe and the homeland of mystery and marvel.

Three legends of European origin nourished and stimulated the medieval conception of fabulous India: the Romance of Alexander, the saga of St. Thomas the Apostle, and the tradition of Prester John. Stories about the feats of the great Macedonian conqueror were compiled at Alexandria during the third century A.D. into a nameless book which became the basic source for the medieval romances celebrating the deeds of Alexander in India. From the Latin and vernacular versions of the Alexander stories the historian, encyclopedists, Poets, preachers, and collectors of myths of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance drew inspiration for their accounts of India. The popular conception of India derived from these literary materials is marked by sharp and vivid contrasts. India is a land of unbelievable opulence with a severe and unpleasant climate. It is peopled by beautiful Amazons and wise, moral Gymnosophists. Alexander, who became a chivalric Christian hero during the crusading era, was seen, like Prester John, to be a defender of Christian Europe against the depredations of the Moors and the devils who inspire them. While some Humanists derided as false the stories enshrined in the
deeds of Alexander, these tales continued to attract both literati and popular storytellers until 1600.

The sage of St. Thomas the Apostle in India and the tradition of Prester John, a powerful Christian ruler who lived east of the Muslim world, reinforced and amplified the medieval conception of the East. The Alexander stories established the wealth and wisdom of India, St. Thomas had brought Christianity to south India, and the fiction of Prester John kept alive the hope the Crusaders cherished of finding an ally in their fight against the Saracens. Tales which migrated westward from India’s “ocean of story” introduced the life and parables of the Buddha into European literature through the popular legend of Barlam and Josephat. In the process India was transformed into a country of exemplary morality and its kings into models for the princes of Europe. India had become by the end of the Middle Ages the land of wealth, wisdom, Christian successes, and morality—a region in which the most wondrous events might be expected to occur!

Eastern products, which entered Europe through intermediaries, lent substance to the medieval dream of the East as a land of marvels and Wizardry. Ignorant of their provenance the Europeans of the pre-crusading era, could only look in astonishment at the rich and complicated textiles of India and at the mysterious, translucent porcelains of China and speculate about the people who made them. The flow from Asia into Europe of products, techniques, and ideas for invention and innovation quickened during and after the Crusades. By the end of the Middle Ages several fundamental ideas and inventions were known in Europe that came to be of utmost importance to its subsequent evolution: the concepts and notation of Hindu-Arabic mathematics, the idea of the magnetic needle for use in navigation, paper, and gunpowder. Along with these imports came a revival of the idea that technological innovation was possible and that man by his own efforts could control and alter his environment.

Medieval Europe’s isolation was broken by the Crusades the Mongolian invasions, and the overland voyages to Cathay which followed. The Crusades had restored direct relations with the Levant and had brought new information and products to Europe. Much research still needs to be done on the effects of the Crusaders upon Europe’s relations with the more distant East. Mongol invasions of eastern Europe of 1240-41 awakened Christendom to the immediacy of a new danger from the east. But it also aroused hopes of finding a new ally in the seemingly interminable strife with Islam. The pagan Mongols controlled the overland routes from the Levant to eastern Asia and, unlike the Muslims, were not averse to Christians. Emissaries from the papacy and King Louis IX of France inaugurated a series of missions to the Mongols of the thirteenth century. With the extension of Mongolian hegemony over China in 1264, the road from Acre to Peking was opened for merchants and missionaries. In 1275 Marco Polo arrived in northern China and was shortly taken into the Khan’s service. For seventeen years he worked for the Mongols before returning to Venice in 1295. The Description of the World which he recorded shortly thereafter was the first detailed narrative about China and its neighbors prepared by an observer at first-hand. While some contemporaries considered his account to be but another romance, Marco’s book quickly set the popular imagination afame. The scholarly, as they put their skepticism aside in deference to the confirmation Polo received from later European observers, gradually came to accept Polo’s book as the most comprehensive and authoritative account of the East, particularly of Cathay, then available.
Of the Franciscans who traveled in Asia on apostolic duties, none left a more complete account than Odoric of Pordenone, a friar of the early fourteenth century. His book was widely circulated in manuscript during the fourteenth century and was recognized as a priestly confirmation of Polo’s merchant tale. It was given even wider circulation when John Mandeville later based his popular Travels on its descriptions of the East. During the long century of Mongol peace ending around 1350, many of the myths of the past were dispelled or transformed. New priorities emerged as Cathay became of greater moment to Europe than India both as a center of commerce and as a mission field. Muslims were not as prominent or powerful in China as they were in India. The revelation of Cathay added a dimension of reality to Europe’s image of the East which had previously been wanting and provided a stimulus to the commercial powers to outflank Muslim control of the sea and land routes to southern Asia and China.

This heritage of interrelated fact and fantasy continued to color the Renaissance vision of the East both before and after the great overseas discoveries. Marco Polo and Mandeville remained the authorites on the East, and their credibility was enhanced rather than diminished by the first hand reports of later travelers. In 1441 Nicolo de’ Conti, a Venetian merchant, returned to Italy after twenty-five years in the East. In response to questions posed by the Humanist, Poggio Bracciolini, Conti described in detail his personal experiences in Asia, especially in India. Their discussions were summarized by Poggio and first appeared in print in 1492 under the title India recognita. From his lengthy experience in Asia’s maritime trade Conti was able to comment empirically and without reference to earlier European accounts on geographical and nautical matters. He discussed lucidly Indian manners and customs and stressed the regional differences in social practices. Since it appeared under the aegis of a renowned Humanist and papal secretary, Conti’s story was received cordially. Date from it were quickly included in the navigational and geographical works of the fifteenth century. An India of reality now competed more equally with China for Europe’s attention.

The sea route to India, opened after 1498 by Portuguese navigators, merchants, and clerics, steadily added substance to European vision. Direct trading contacts between India and Portugal inaugurated permanent and mutually profitable relations. A growing participation in the spice trade by the other European countries evoked responses throughout the Continent. New information entered Europe through the reports of merchants and navigators despite Portugal’s efforts to maintain control over navigational and commercial intelligence relating to the trade. The Portuguese were never able to maintain a perfect monopoly of the spices or the news from the East. Representatives of other European nations, especially Italians and south Germans, figured in the financing and planning of the Portuguese voyages and trading activities. News was relayed by these foreign participants to the printers of their native lands who began publishing newsletters in the vernaculars. Practically all of the printed materials, except for the missionary writings, appeared in the vernacular languages throughout the sixteenth century, including all of the travel collections.

Following the creation of the Society of Jesus in the 1541, the Jesuits became the acknowledged leaders of the Christian missionary endeavor in Asia. From their base at Goa the Jesuits extended their apostolate to Japan, the Spiceries and China. Under instructions form their superiors, the Jesuits in the field were enjoined to write regular and comprehensive reports on
their progress and on the peoples and places where they worked. An office was established in Rome to communicate with the missionaries, to sift the incoming letters, and to select, edit, and translate those to be circularized in Europe. Compilations of these letters were printed form time to time in the vernaculars of Catholic Europe. It was from the published and unpublished Jesuit letters that the Latinist and Humanist G.F. Maffei prepared his classic history of the Jesuits in the East that was first published at Florence in 1588.

The new East being unveiled by the observers in the field produced in Europe a sense of mild shock, wary fascination, or deep wonderment. Much of what had been inherited from the medieval past continued to dominate the vision held by the broad public. In fact, many Europeans still failed to distinguish between the Islamic Orient and the rest of Asia or between China and India as separate civilizations. Preoccupied by the fundamental changes shaking sixteenth-century Europe, even the learned and artistic responded only slowly to the import and meaning of the overseas discoveries. Collections of the “wonders” brought back from Asia were assembled and integrated into cabinets of curiosities. Contemplation of these “silent sources” provoked reflection, discussion, and imitation. Literary accounts and maps were added to library collections in every country of Europe. In the Protestant countries the Catholic accounts were distrusted and sometimes banned. The discovery of Japan and its high civilization, a land not known to the omniscient ancients, was most shocking to the Humanists. The appearance of Japanese legates in southern Europe from 1584 to 1586 lent substance and credibility to the praise heaped by the Jesuits on the insular kingdom and its inhabitants. Still, perhaps because of ethno-centricism, fear the Ottoman East, or dislike for the outpouring of treasure for Eastern wares, a full half century had to pass before Europeans recognized that they had anything fundamental to learn from Asia.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century the literature of Europe, including history, responded positively to the revelation of the East by adopting novel subject matter, by experiments with new literary forms, and by criticism of traditional European historical theories. The products of Asia, along with the widely available writings and maps, introduced new dimensions into European romance, epics, and didactic literature. Artistic depictions of Asian peoples and products became more naturalistic, objective, and factual. Comparisons and contrasts between Europe and Asia, always there implicitly in the early collections of curiosities and in the literary descriptions, became more self-conscious and explicit. In such explicit comparisons Europe often came off second best in the estimates of artists, scientist, scholars, and literati. Unsuccessful efforts to imitate Asian techniques in arts and crafts produced new questions about Europe’s superiority and led to the grudging admission that the West had a few things to learn from the Asia of reality. In the writings of Montaigne, Botero, Charron, and other social commentators, Asia was seen to be, in contrast to America, the locale of ancient civilizations that had shown a remarkable survival power. China, in particular, was fount of ancient wisdom and of modern attainments worthy of emulation. By the end of the sixteenth century a new cultural relativism had been created in some of the best minds of Europe as all artistic and scholarly disciplines, except Christian theology, were enriched or shaken by the revelation of Asia.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries China and the Christian missionary enterprise there became a subject of general European concern. The losses suffered by the
closing of Japan to all Europeans except the Dutch reinforced the view that the Asian nations could control their own destinies and deal with Europeans on their own terms. The overthrow of the “civilized” Chinese dynasty of the Ming by the “barbarous” Manchus shocked a Europe, ever fearful of the Turks, into an awareness of the fact that even the greatest and most ancient civilizations could suffer invasion and subjection by culturally backward peoples. A vogue for Indian textiles produces the “India craze” of the late seventeenth century and led to substantial financial losses for the burgeoning cotton and silk industries of Europe. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the “India craze” was replaced by a vogue for “Chinoiseries” that was to include widespread reverence for the “wise Chinese”, his institutions and his culture. It was the industrial revolution in Europe, more than any other single factor, which revitalized that assured sense of superiority which came to characterize Europe’s attitude towards Asia in the nineteenth century. The missionary, supported as he was by his home government, was not the benign observer of the great cultures of China and India that the Jesuits had been but an agent of Western power and superiority.

Our more regular intercourse with Asia in this century has transformed what were once “scratched on our minds” into deep fissures of self-conscious comparison. While a few of the traditional myths about Asia still obscure our vision, we have become acutely aware of the threat posed by the Asia of reality to our commerce, beliefs, and institutions. The Japanese, called Theodore Roosevelt the “Yankees of the East”, have three times attacked the West militarily during this century and now compete commercially with the most advanced of the Western nations. Communism in China and nationalism in India likewise pose potential challenges to the West. Little wonder then that the twentieth century, with its revolutions, wars, and nuclear fears, has revived in the West a wondering and troubling doubt, reminiscent of that which prevailed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of its own superiority and permanence of its traditional ideas, values, and institutions.