

The Asian Mind Today

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There is no such thing as a typical Asian or Oriental mind any more than there is a typical Western mind. The phrase is only a shorthand way of stating that, if we wish to understand a people, we must take seriously the internal dimension of mind and feeling as well as external factors such as politics, economics, kinship and social structures, diplomatic relations and military affairs. We are all what we are—psycho-physical-spiritual beings—mortals endowed with memory, intelligence and sexuality, trying to make some sense out of our transitory existence in this mysterious universe. Yet different cultural traditions have developed their own characteristic way of apprehending the meaning of life, nurtured and preserved by respective languages, customs, myths and religions.

It is exceedingly difficult, however, to talk in such broad categories as *the Asian* and *the Western* modes of feeling and perception. And in limited space the best one can do is to portray certain characteristic features of the traditional, if idealized, Eastern “world of meaning”—as is done in old Oriental paintings with, for example, the branch of a tree, a mountain and a brook, suggesting perspectives and inner feelings rather than a full and detailed landscape.

To speak autobiographically, I have been teaching Eastern religions to American students for over two decades. My perennial headache is how to interpret the basic attitudes and perspectives of Eastern religions to my students in a Western language which is inclined to be logical, precise and systematic. To be sure, not all Westerners are logical and precise, and there have been many intuitive thinkers and mystics in the West. But, by and large, the Westerner's mindset has been conditioned by strong em-

phases on reason, judgment and discrimination. There is much truth in Betty Heimann's observation that the profound gulf between East and West is provided by the word “system” (*systema*), which means literally putting together, or com-position, in a rational order. As she said in *Indian and Western Philosophy: A Study in Contrasts*, the underlying assumption here is that “the human mind thinks ‘systematically,’ prescribes the order of research, the selection, disposition and composition of ideas.” On the other hand, the Easterner's mindset has been accustomed to be more intuitive and reflective: “to look, to contemplate, to be receptive—but in no degree implying any idea of regulating the facts of Nature.”

I am always struck by the way most Westerners use the two terms “reality” and “illusion” as sharply demarcated opposites. Reality, so Webster tells us, refers to “state, character, quality, or fact of being real, existent . . .,” or “an actual person, event, or the like; an accomplished fact,” thus implying that reality is “that which is not imagination or fiction—that which has objective existence.” In sharp contrast to reality, illusion refers to “an unreal or misleading image presented to the vision's deceptive appearance,” or “a perception which fails to give the true character of an object perceived.”

Such a sharp dichotomy between reality and illusion in the West has tended to place art, music, literature, poetry, myths and religion into an ambiguous category of imagination, situated somewhere between reality and illusion. In this respect the traditional Eastern “world of meaning” affirmed the seamlessness and continuity between reality and illusion, between facts and fantasies, between consciousness and dream and between religion and art. An ancient Chinese sage, Chuang Tzu, once dreamed that he was a butterfly, and he began to wonder whether he was Chuang Tzu who dreamed that he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed that he was Chuang Tzu. And I might add that many Easterners have been in-

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trigued by similar questions. We might even say that to the Easterner illusion is one facet of reality.

This feature of the traditional Eastern world of meaning has often misled the Westerner. One result is the characterization of Eastern religions by many Western writers as "otherworldly." But, as the Filipino scholar-statesman Carlos Romulo has stated in his recent book *Clarifying the Asian Mystique* (Manila, 1970), the mysterious, remote, otherworldly Asia is a creation of the Western mind, which does not know how to put the seamlessness of the Eastern world of meaning into neatly divided Western categories. To be sure, Hinduism holds that this world is the realm of *Māyā*, usually translated as cosmic illusion, but this does not mean this world is simply a state of dream, a mirage or a figment of the imagination. This world is the external appearance, form and extension of something which is really real (Brahman), so that the Hindu sages teach us "Thou art that," implying the fundamental unity and identification between the realm of really real and the realm of appearance or illusion.

Buddhism, too, holds that this phenomenal world is not really real, characterized as it is by impermanence and transitoriness. Yet, as D. T. Suzuki stated in *Zen and Japanese Culture*: "When seen from the point of view of absolute identity, good and evil are mere forms of relativity, and 'Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form' . . . The holy doctrines of Buddha are mingled in things of the world; Enlightenment (Bodhi) is to be sought in the midst of passions and desires; for where the Buddha is there are beings. . . ."

It is not surprising that according to the seamless world of meaning of the East man was regarded as an integral part of the cosmos. To be sure, unlike the ancient Greeks, who triumphantly proclaimed that "man is the measure of all things," the Eastern view of man is much more modest. On the other hand, unlike the ancient Hebrews, who regarded man as a sojourner in this world, the ancient Easterner knew that man has a rightful place in the cosmos, which is a community of beings and not of things. Understandably, man in the East felt deep kinship with the world of nature, which to him was a majestic work of art. Thus an Indian poet wrote:

In this beautiful world I have no desire to die;
I wish to live in the midst of men.
In this sunlight, in the flowering forests,
in the heart of all living beings, may I
find a place.

[Tagore, 1861-1941]

Similarly, a Japanese poet wrote:

What a pity, O cherry blossoms, so hurriedly
scattering away!
Why not follow the spirit of Spring,
So peaceful, so relaxing, so eternally contented?
[Fujiwara Toshinari, 1114-1204]

Religion and art, poetry and literature, none of which can be easily separated from others in the East, all share one quality, namely, the sensitive and intimate response of the heart to the rhythm of the world of nature, with its joy and sorrow, beauty and tragedy. All in all, the feeling quality implicit in the traditional Eastern attitude toward the world of nature is succinctly portrayed by Langdon Warner's description of the Chinese ink painting of the Sung tradition. The ink painting, says Warner,

manages, with admirable economy, in a flick, to show a curving surface and an edge. The soft ink is coal black, or watered down to a mist of gray. It omits just as the eye omits in looking at a landscape, and the spectator brings to the scene his own image-making faculty that we all share, no two of us alike, the exercise of which is the highest creative delight [*The Enduring Art of Japan*].

What Warner says of landscape can be applied to the meaning of life itself. Man in the East, from time immemorial, facing the capriciousness of life, has felt and contemplated the mystery of life without trying to regulate the facts of nature but also without simply accepting the givenness of life fatalistically. His attitude was one of receptiveness; nevertheless, he exercised his own image-making faculty to perceive and recreate the inner fabric of life's meaning and exhibit it in art, religion, philosophy, music, literature, as well as in interhuman relationships.

Such was the ethos of the idealized traditional

Eastern world of meaning, which, though greatly disrupted in the modern period, still remains alive in the memory of modern Asians. Nostalgia plays a powerful role even in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in Asia, where reality and illusion, facts and fantasies and consciousness and dream were understood to be an unbroken continuum.

The disintegration of the traditional world of meaning in Asia during the past four centuries is a complex problem which cannot be discussed here. It is worth noting, however, that many present-day Asians blame Western colonialism for all the troubles of contemporary Asia. Actually, though, the decline of Asia during the past 450 years was caused initially by an internal cultural erosion, by top-heavy bureaucratic regimes which tried to divide and to rule different compartments of life. Indeed, the seamlessness of cultural life was deeply disrupted in Asia—for example, in India under the Mughal empire which superimposed Muslim rule, in Japan under the Tokugawa feudal regime which superimposed modified Confucian ideologies, and in China under the Manchu dynasty which rigidly controlled and stifled the life of the Chinese. The cultural stagnation that developed in Asia became an easy prey of the commercial, political and cultural encroachment of the West. Asian peoples' historic confidence in the superiority of their cultures was rudely shattered by technologically superior Western civilization, motivated by its messianic complex, characterized by William Haas as "a strange compound of genuine idealistic responsibility, blindness and hypocrisy, with a strong dose of will-to-power as the basic component." Under the colonial rule, education meant Westernized education, and civilization meant Western civilization.

In short, life throughout most of Asia became departmentalized and fragmented. The seamlessness of the traditional world of meaning was torn by the intrusion of the Westerner's world of meaning, and this undercut and destroyed the Easterner's sense of dignity, pride and value. An Indochinese writer poignantly expressed the sentiment of the people toward the French rule when he wrote:

In your eyes we are savages, dumb brutes incapable of distinguishing between good and evil. You not only refuse to treat us as equals, but even fear to approach us, as if we were filthy creatures. . . . There is a sadness of feeling and shame which fills our hearts during the evening's contemplation when we review all the humiliations endured during the day.

Although this statement was made several decades ago, we should entertain the possibility that such feelings remain a basic issue today in that troubled land of Vietnam.

Recent developments in Asia—in Africa too for that matter—have now tilted the balance of the East-West relationship politically, economically and culturally. The nineteenth century, in which the "world of meaning" of the Westerners dominated the main stage of the whole world, extended somewhat beyond the year 1899. As far as Asians are concerned, it was not the year 1900 but the year 1945 which marked a significant line of demarcation in their experiences. The emergence of independent Asian nations that followed—the Philippines (1946), India and Pakistan (1947), Ceylon, Burma, South and North Korea (1948), Indonesia and the Peoples Republic of China (1949), South and North Vietnam (1954), Cambodia (1955), Laos (1956), Federation of Malaya (1957), Malaysia (1963) and Bangladesh (1971)—signifies not only the end of the period of modern Western colonial imperialism in Asia but, more basically, a momentous redefinition of the conception of the dignity, value and freedom of man.

That redefinition is not simply the universalization of what the West has understood dignity, value and freedom to be. It is no longer a cozy discussion within the European family and its spheres of interest. By tilting the balance politically, economically, culturally and religiously, Asia is now making a serious attempt to restore its historic world of meaning on a new plane. I am not suggesting that contemporary Asian leaders are rejecting the Western influence altogether and trying to return to the pristine past of the East. Admittedly, their nostalgia for the idealized traditional past heritage is very strong. However, they are also determined to appropriate certain features of Western civilization in order to enrich their world of meaning so that it will have viability and power in the years ahead.

It is in this context that we must try to understand the significance of the Chinese Revolution under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung. Its claim to bring about a "new culture" can best be understood as the continuation of the humanistic-religious culture of traditional China but with a radical reinterpretation based upon the guiding inspirations of Marx and Lenin. This two-prong attitude—of saying "yes but no" to traditional Chinese culture while saying "no but yes" to Marx and Lenin—is succinctly stated by Mao Tse-tung:

. . . We must fully absorb progressive foreign culture as an aid to the development of China's new culture; but it is also wrong to import indiscriminately foreign culture into China, for we must proceed from the actual needs of the Chinese people and assimilate it critically. . . . Similarly, we must neither totally exclude nor blindly accept China's ancient culture; we must accept it critically so as to help the development of China's new culture.

True to Mao's principle, the Chinese Communists today make critical appropriation of traditional Chinese historiography, for example, while at the same time shifting the location of history's meaning. Traditional Chinese historical writing, cutting history into dynastic slices, was a very stereotyped affair in its attempt to demonstrate that the last emperor of a dynasty was not worthy and thus the "mandate of Heaven" had to be taken away from him, usually by an act of revolt of the founder of the new dynasty, who, by virtue of his success, was considered worthy to receive the "mandate of Heaven." The aim of such historical writing was to draw moral lessons from history, and the basis for moral judgment was sought in the past golden period, the legendary period of the ancient sage kings. That is to say, the paradigmatic meaning of history was located in the ancient past.

It is pertinent to note that present Chinese Communist historiography, which too draws heavily on traditional history for moral lessons, shifts the locus of the meaning of history from the past to the present and future. Accordingly, past historical events are judged not on whether or not the meaning of those events did or did not conform to the ancient moral norm but whether or not the meaning of those historical events can be profitably utilized to give impetus to the creation of a new form of culture which is yet to come.

Throughout his life, in all his voluminous publications and numerous speeches, Mao Tse-tung has been "preaching" one central message: "We must instill into the people throughout the country the faith that China belongs to the Chinese people. . . ." This implies not only that people must be willing to make a sacrifice for the common cause of self-reliance but that the people's minds and hearts, as well as economics and politics, must be collectivized. In this way every aspect of life will have to be reintegrated to bring about a new society, a new culture, a new people and a new seamless world of meaning. For this task the Peking regime has made a daring attempt to integrate the whole Chinese society by creating state-controlled communes. Historically it was the family that was considered the ultimate unit of society in China; today it is the State which is the ultimate unit of society.

Outsiders have often wondered how realistic the Peking regime is. Do the Communist leaders really believe that they can destroy the family system, which has cemented the Chinese society since time immemorial? Even if the leaders believe it possible, how is it possible for 800 million Chinese people to go along with such a seemingly absurd idea? Yet there is evidence to testify that

many, if not most, Chinese people share the visionary approach to the practical problems of the nation. As Professor E.G. Pulleyblank points out, during the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) people were convinced by the Peking leaders that "they could pull themselves up by their bootstraps, establish a communal utopia overnight, revolutionize agriculture, and at the same time make human effort substitute for lack of capital in establishing a decentralized industrial basis in the countryside." Again, during the recent Cultural Revolution, "even economic goals, even the achievement of technical expertise so necessary if China is to modernize herself, have been subordinated to the creation of a totally egalitarian society in which all that counts is selfless dedication and strength of purpose." Here one might conclude that what is happening in China today is a colossal and collective madness. But on the other hand one might also conclude that what is happening in China might reflect an attitude toward reality and illusion or facts and fantasies which is very different from that of Westerners.

What I have said about China is only one, though significant, example of what is happening in various parts of Asia, where people are now determined to reintegrate and restore their historic world of meaning on a new plane. For the most part, Asia fortunately is no longer emotionally preoccupied with the haunting memory of the colonial period. On the other hand, "modernity," that unique ethos of the modern world which had earlier shaken the very foundations of Western culture and society and has been subsequently "inhaled" by Asia, will continue to evolve changes and innovations in various spheres of life in Asia. Consequently, modern Asians are now destined to experience, as much as Westerners do, the anguish and agony of life in the twentieth century. But again, while modernity might be seen by the casual observer as a point of optimism, i.e., as that which will provide a basis for common or mutual understanding, in fact it only further complicates the relation between East and West because the incorporation of modernity in the East will be within their own "world of meaning." This implies that the so-called East-West relationship has reached a new phase with all the ambiguities this involves.

It may well be that modern men, both in the West and in Asia and Africa, will be compelled to look for a new world of meaning, a world that will emerge out of the old, it is true, yet take full account of common, basic problems of human existence without, however, obliterating the particularities of diverse ethnic, national and cultural experiences. If so, it is not too soon for us to try to learn to talk to each other instead of talking at each other as we have been doing for so long!