

# Connections

## Neither East Nor West

Russia, runs one of Churchill's famous sayings, "is a riddle wrapped up in an enigma." Russia was mysterious for Europe because, in sentences describing it, subjects and predicates appeared in unusual, even bizarre relations as they do in riddles. Russia, after all, was both Eastern and Western. But riddles and enigmas in political affairs are only reflections of the inadequacy of our ideas, the defective nature of our understanding of the world. Children find riddles a challenge; adults, especially when they involve matters of great moment, find them annoying and try to ignore them.

It seems to me that Japan is the riddle of Asia. It has refused to be "Eastern" in our understanding of that term. Japan's response to the modern age has never been appropriately passive, and partly as a result Japan is not sufficiently exotic to our notions of the "mysterious East." We have never really been confident about Japan since she stopped being a "hermit kingdom." Japan is most familiar to American eyes in the flats and costumes of *The Mikado* and *Madame Butterfly*; World War II pictures led us, aware and anticipating, to the hara-kiri scene. We are still, I think, surprised that Japanese speak our language.

"Japan," a noted scholar recently remarked, "will be Nixon's Vietnam." We may disagree; Watergate is only the most immediately visible evidence of the Administration's talent for producing disasters, and the Japanese debacle may be outmatched in the competition. But there is no doubt that the Nixon Administration has consistently—almost with malice—pursued a course of conflict with Japan. Okinawa is the exception. The rule has been affront and injury where the Administration found it possible. Some of this is, no doubt, a response to newly felt rivalry with Japan—felt now because of the weakness of the American economy as much as the strength of the Japanese. More probably due to myopia and stupidity, which the American regime possesses in such abundance. But I find it difficult not to see Southern California in the background—neither a riddle nor an enigma, but all too comprehensible.

Dick Nixon grew up in the Orange Belt, with its addiction to a unique combination of missions to China and hatred for the Oriental. It was a world

which read Homer Lea and Lothrop Stoddard with attention, which meditated with lascivious outrage on the "rape of Nanking," and which—finally—pressured for and obtained the evacuation of Japanese Americans in World War II. Nixon calculates and reasons in the White House East and the White House West; emotionally, he is still a boy from Whittier for whom the Japanese are especially threatening, uniquely perverse because they refuse to be arcane.

We have given up evangelizing the East. The Pacific trade in ideas now flows in the other direction. Asia has become a major consumer of Western technology; the West has responded by importing Eastern wisdom. A healthy synthesis? Possibly, but not so long as we continue to ignore Asia as it is in favor of our image of an Occult Continent. Rabbi Wolf may not be the best person to interpret Rennie Davis's conversion, for Wolf seems to regard Davis—a middle American after all—as some sort of phenomenon. For me Rennie is a friend, and his new faith seems to me a kind of aberrant "phase" (or I hope it is). It lacks all sense of the tragic, the finite and the courageous in human affairs, and hence is wanting in everything that goes to make up wisdom, East or West. The prophets knew that idols are clay and stone, and so are those who make them; human character is reflected in the gods we adore. The Satguru is a god suited to perennial adolescents; it is only natural that he should have a following in America. It would be a sign of adulthood if we could abandon our image of the East and recognize not only the complex exchange that is the stuff of our daily commercial and cultural relations with Asia but the human stratum beneath. Kipling, empires and all, was right in the last analysis: "There is neither East nor West. . . ."

