

'East versus West': Beyond Dichotomy and towards an Acknowledgement of Differences

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The theme 'East *versus* west' is an old topic for discussion, but one that is constantly being rehashed. Though it has many aspects, a number of elements remain vague. Do East and West each form a monolithic bloc? Where does the East begin in the West's eyes, and vice versa, the West for the East? What, if any, are the basic differences separating the two?

Palaeontologists tell us that a dividing line indicating a divergence of traditions in stone tools can be traced back to the Lower Palaeolithic era, that is, a million years ago, in the western region of India. To the east of that line, in other words in East and South-east Asia, the most common tools are choppers and chopping-tools, while to the west, in western Asia, Europe and Africa, the main tools are hand-axes.¹ The former are suitable for working vegetable materials and making bamboo or wooden, therefore perishable, objects, which for this reason leave no trace in the form of archaeological clues. The hand-axes are capable of being worked into stylized shapes and are appropriate for dismembering large herbivores and cutting up their meat.

This divergence is thought to derive initially from differences in the respective fauna and flora of the regions chosen by the first emigrants from Africa. The hypothesis underlying this east–west divergence in the earliest human industries, which was first presented in the 1940s by Hallam L. Movius Jnr, an American palaeontologist, has recently been advanced and developed, on the basis of new archaeological and anthropological discoveries, by Japanese palaeontologist Takeru Akazawa.² The relationship between the *Homo erectus* of the period and *Homo sapiens*, the ancestors of present-day humans, is still a controversial topic. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that already, in the early stages of working with stone, humans are thought to have developed specific local technologies, depending on the character peculiar to the surrounding ecological conditions; even today distant reminders of the contrast between these characteristics might be perceived.

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Clearly, however, an east–west dichotomy is too simplistic. For instance, if we take into consideration historical factors related to intra-regional relations, that is, within each of these two zones, together with inter-regional relations between East and West, we could in no way contrast East with West categorically and panchronically. Here I shall take Japan as a sample of the East, not only because it is the country about which I am best informed, but also and especially because it offers a case study that is symptomatic and contradictory on several levels, both as regards east–west relations and in terms of internal relations within the eastern sphere.

What characterizes Japan in east–west relations is its ambiguous status between the two, and this became significant from the period of Japan’s so-called modernization, in other words from the Meiji era, which begins in the mid-19th century. Up to this time and from the second half of the first millennium Japan had absorbed from China and Korea, during the reign of members of the different dynasties that succeeded one another at the helm of these continental countries, considerable influences in several fields, such as writing, the calendar, medicine, religion – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism – literature, fine arts, music . . . However, these influences were well integrated into Japanese culture and gave rise to new creations. Many engineers, monks and scholars from the continent were invited to Japan, while students, monks, artists left Japan, bound particularly for China, to discover new knowledge there or deepen their understanding. In a word the Chinese and the Koreans were for a long time the Japanese people’s superiors.

From the second half of the 19th century the situation changed. After the restoration of the Meiji monarchy, in the reign of Tennō, the holy king who headed the government, the army and the Shinto religion, which had been reorganized into the national religion, Japan was quick to introduce the best aspects of western civilization under the slogans ‘*Wakon yōsai*’ (Western techniques and Japanese soul), ‘*Fukoku kyōhei*’ (Enrich and militarize the state) and ‘*Datsua nyūō*’ (Leave Asia in order to become like the West).

The westernizing of Japan that was accomplished in this way is characterized by the fact that cultures from the West were introduced into Japan independently, indirectly and selectively. Despite military threats from the West’s great powers Japan escaped colonization, unlike most Asian countries. From the Meiji restoration in 1868 onwards, after two and a half centuries of Japan being closed to western countries (apart from Holland), the Japanese government invited a number of teachers, engineers, artists and soldiers, selected from among the best of the period and coming from different western countries, including the USA, and offered them fabulous rewards; at the same time it sent young members of the Japanese elite to various western countries so that they could learn elements of the local culture that were the most worthy of study and the most likely to be useful for the new Japan’s development.

And so the introduction of western cultures to the Japanese archipelago, which was carried out selectively and on the initiative of Japan itself, was accomplished through a small number of representatives of the Japanese and western elites; it was thus not mass contact imposed by a particular western colonizer, with its cohorts of soldiers, traders and administrators sent out from the ‘motherland’. For this reason we can say that Japan brought in selected elements of *the civilization* of the West but

not *the culture* of one particular western country in its entirety. At the same time this method of becoming like modern western civilization, with the objective of immediate use and in a more or less abstract form, I think has a defect as regards the complete understanding of a culture of the West in its day-to-day minutiae.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, when western industrial capitalism needed colonies whose territory it could rule and whose inhabitants would be both producers of raw materials for western industries and buyers of the goods made from them, the West's expansion towards the East gathered pace in step with the burgeoning nationalist fever in Europe. In this international context Japan with its new regime was forced, in order to escape colonization by the West, to adopt a policy summed up in the three slogans quoted above, a policy that was offensive as regards its Asian neighbours who had been its superiors.

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This policy was effectively pursued. The victory in the war against Qing China in 1894 and 1895 marked the first great step in this expansionist policy. However, six days after the signing of the peace treaty confirming the ceding to Japan of the Liaodong peninsula, Russia, Germany and France, in a diplomatic intervention accompanied by the military threat of the Russian and German fleets in Asia, forced Japan to hand the region back to China. Three years later Russia acquired the port of Lüshun (Port Arthur), a strategically important point on the peninsula, as a 'territory on lease', and this became one of the causes of the war between Japan and Russia (1904–5). When the Boxer (*Yihequan*) uprising occurred, Japan and its army were on the side of the seven western countries (Russia, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Austria and the USA), whose international expeditionary force suppressed the revolt in Peking.

After this event Russia kept its army in Manchuria and closed Korea to Japanese trade, which ratcheted up tension between the two countries. On the other hand, Qing China, which, following the events of 1900, had had to pay the allied countries a huge sum in reparations, quickly became weakened and was broken up by the western powers' (now including Japan) concessions and rights to profit.

It is obvious that since the end of the 19th century the clash of interests on Chinese and Korean territory between the western powers on the one hand, and a westernized Japan on the other, had become the main cause of conflicts in East Asia. When the war between Japan and Russia was under way, Britain and the USA, who wanted to halt Russia's southward advance, had a common interest with Japan. Britain had even concluded a pact of alliance with Japan; the British built and sold to Japan the battleship *Mikasa*, flagship of the Japanese fleet commanded by Admiral Tôgô, which annihilated the Russian Baltic fleet at the naval battle of Tsushima, an operation that decided Japan's victory over Russia. As far as the Americans were concerned, they acted as intermediaries between the two parties, in the person of the then president Theodore Roosevelt, to get a peace treaty signed in Japan's favour, at a time when Japan was facing huge financial problems in continuing the war.

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In the first half of the 20th century, when the militaristic empire of the Rising Sun became too powerful, to the point of posing a threat to the interests of the USA, Britain and Holland in Asia and Oceania, it was these western powers that opposed it. Just before entering the Pacific war, with that persecution mania that was simply the flipside of aggression, the Japanese government announced that the country was the victim of A-B-C-D (American, British, Chinese and Dutch) strategic encirclement. As regards Japan's relations with the USA in particular, tensions connected with Japanese emigration to America had already surfaced in the second half of the 19th century. As a westernized portion of the East situated at its extreme eastern tip, Japan had a close relationship across the Pacific with the USA, which in turn was a part of the West at its western extremity. Here we find the presence of another mode of contact between East and West.

In international relations in the years before the Second World War the problem of emigration was very important. Before the war the poverty of Japan's rural population was a result of two main factors: the system of tenant farming, which benefited large landowners, and inheritance of land by the eldest son. Even in the case of a landowning family this principle forced the younger offspring to leave the village, unless they agreed to farm another property, or a plot generously granted by their older brother, to whom they became beholden for the rest of their lives. Because of these structural features of pre-war Japanese rural society, exacerbated by fairly rapid population growth, the pressures in favour of emigration were strong enough to produce the chronic phenomenon of 'victims' who were also potential 'aggressors' on foreign soil.³

We can distinguish three waves of Japanese emigration occurring before the Second World War. One headed towards the United States, the other two to Brazil and Manchuria, and of them two can be considered as more or less direct causes of the war in the Pacific. Mass immigration of Japanese into the USA intensified in the 1880s, just when American law was beginning to restrict the entry of Chinese migrants. In the mid-19th century they had been admitted as cheap labour in order to finish building the transcontinental railway as fast as possible. However, with the project's completion and the subsequent general depression, their presence had become a threat to immigrant workers from Europe, particularly those from Ireland.

At first the Japanese seemed more able than the Chinese to get used to the western way of life in general and the American lifestyle in particular. However, just after the unexpected victory of Japan over Russia and with the spread of the idea of the 'yellow peril' launched by the German emperor Wilhelm II, mistrust of Japanese migrants grew increasingly strong. They were no longer seen simply as undesirable competitors on the American labour market, but also as representatives of Japan's ultra-nationalist expansionism. They were victims of the discriminatory hatred of American citizens: between January and June 1907, for example, Japanese citizens, alone or in groups, suffered 57 attacks, and 18 of their homes or workplaces were destroyed. After enacting several legal measures against Japanese immigration, the American administration ordered a complete halt in 1924, which strengthened the realization of a state of crisis between the two countries and prepared the way for the war in the Pacific.

The case of Japanese emigration to Brazil presents a contrast in several ways with

the one that has just been described. The 19th century is noted for the abolition of the traffic in African slaves as well as the migration of Europeans to the Americas, which involved mass movements of people: in this way 75 million individuals are thought to have crossed the Atlantic during the crisis that befell European rural areas between 1870 and 1890.

After a wave of immigration coming mainly from Germany and southern Italy, a first group of Japanese reached the Brazilian coast in 1908, after a long voyage of 52 days via southern Africa. At that period the anti-Japanese movement in the USA had spread and it was growing increasingly difficult for fresh Japanese migrants to gain admittance to American soil. This restriction also applied to the Hawaiian islands, which had been annexed by the United States in 1898, and where Japanese citizens had started to settle as early as 1868. To those thinking of emigrating, Brazil therefore seemed like a new hope. In fact Brazilian society in general turned out to be quite welcoming to Japanese workers, whose total number is estimated at around 200,000.

In the 1930s, thanks to the progress made in land use and modernization of methods, Brazilian agriculture no longer needed as large a migrant labour force as earlier. From 1935 onwards the Brazilian government restricted considerably the number of newcomers. This period coincided with the flow of emigration-invasion by the Japanese towards Manchuria, a movement that is one of the direct causes of the conflict between Japan and China first of all, and then of the Pacific war.

The arrival of Japanese settlers on Manchurian territory in the 1930s cannot be called immigration since it was more like a military occupation. In 1931, on the pretext of an incident that was pre-planned by the Kantô division of the Japanese army, the army extended the area of land under its control. The following year the Japanese government gave back a throne to Puyi, the last Qing emperor, thus creating a puppet state, Manchukuo. On the Kantô division's instigation 'immigrant' pioneers and farmers, recruited from among the poorest farmers from a single village or several neighbouring villages, were settled *en masse*.

The objective was to secure work for the most deprived country-people, but these settlements were also designed to ensure order and security in this artificially created society-state and strengthen defences against the neighbouring Soviet Union. For this reason the majority of the 'migrants' were sent to the northern regions, near the border with the USSR.

In total more than 320,000 Japanese, of whom 100,000 were young volunteers, were settled in Manchuria. To carry out this project 20 million hectares of land were confiscated from the local population, which naturally caused revolts against the newcomers. In August 1945, when the Second World War was just coming to an end and two days after the American atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, the USSR declared war on Japan, reneging unilaterally on the treaty of neutrality then in force between the two countries. The Soviet army invaded Manchuria, which Japanese troops had abandoned for the Pacific battlefields. Many Japanese 'immigrants' were killed during that large-scale invasion, leaving behind several thousand very young orphans. It is estimated that 2000 of those children are still living in China today, but up to now it has been possible to identify only half this number.

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If I have spent a long time recalling quite distant historical events associated with Japan's ambiguous position between East and West, this is because these events are at the root of the chief issues of east-west relations in today's Japan. In particular, what happened between 1894 and 1933, in other words between the war waged by expansionist Japan against Qing China (1894–5) and Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations (1933) following the creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, was a decisive turning-point in the position of a Japan halfway between East and West. For the West too, after a serious economic crisis, the year 1933 was a political watershed, with the advent of Hitler's government in Germany and the formation in the United States of Franklin Roosevelt's administration, which recognized the USSR.

I shall now turn to another aspect of that decisive period, artistic representation: I am thinking in particular of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, which embodies several of the period's east-west issues, and is still capable today of raising some important concerns.

The first performance of *Madame Butterfly* in Milan on 17 February 1904 coincided with the seventh day of the Russo-Japanese war. The première was a fiasco, but three months later, with extensive revisions such as the shortening of the Japanese wedding scene at the beginning, the second version, put on in Brescia, was a great success. Since that time the opera has been produced in many western countries and its fourth version, which was sung at the Paris Opéra-Comique in 1907, is still to this day the one that is most often staged.

Nowadays, even in Japan, productions of this opera are very international, especially the most recent one, in Tokyo in July 2002: the director was an American of Italian origin, the Japanese orchestra was conducted by a Korean, the sets were designed by an Italian, the costumes by a Japanese woman, while *Madame Butterfly* was sung by a Frenchwoman, Pinkerton and Suzuki by Koreans and Sharpless by a Spaniard.

Both music and singing were perfect; however, I have to admit that Cio-Cio-San, as interpreted by a Frenchwoman, seemed to me very French, that is, very self-assured and unlikely to end it all in a situation such as the one described in the scenario. The music can probably be more international than the acting. As regards the interpretation of this opera, which is strongly influenced by the taste for exoticism and firmly plugged into the Japanese moral values of its era, opinions are still divided today, as can be seen by reading the programme for each production and noting the different arguments put forward. Some think that this work has nothing to do with the real Japan and that in fact it is a universal tragedy of love. At the very least it is Japan as imagined by an Italian composer who never visited the country, and even if Puccini inclined towards '*verismo*', it is an entirely Italian opera. Others – and it is the Japanese especially who think this – hold that the opera expresses the profound discord that exists between East and West, stemming from the West's discrimination against the East. I read in one programme for the opera an article written by a Japanese music critic who said 'the attack on Pearl Harbor was revenge for Cio-Cio-San's death'.

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In 1999 the Lyon Opera staged a controversial production of the piece, directed by Kijû Yoshida, the famous Japanese film-maker, with sets by an avant-garde Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, and the Japanese singer Hiroko Nishida in the role of Madame Butterfly. The first act was set in the peaceful town of Nagasaki before the Second World War, and the second unfolded in the same town, which was deserted after the atom bomb, with Cio-Cio-San descending into madness. Both sets and costumes were monochrome black and extremely stylized. In a filmed interview with Yoshida, illustrated by some scenes from the opera,⁴ the director indicated that he wanted to superimpose both the events for which Nagasaki had been the common arena: on the one hand the tragedy of a pure-hearted 15-year-old Japanese girl, who became the plaything of an American naval officer and then was deserted by her lover when she was pregnant; and on the other the indiscriminate massacre of Japanese people by the American atom bomb.

It is an extreme viewpoint that many Japanese, myself included, would not share. However, that interpretation expresses the fairly general sentiments of the Japanese about the West, sentiments that I would prefer to call 'persecution mania'. When Japan was forced to hand back the Liaodong region to China by the 1895 intervention of the three western powers, Sohô Tokutomi, a very influential ideologue who owned a big newspaper and was travelling in the peninsula, was extremely annoyed about the news. He took a handful of sand from the beach and brought it back to Japan as an eternal reminder of the affront. After the event he became ultranationalist, whereas he had hitherto been a great campaigning journalist in support of populism. After the country submitted to the western powers' unreasonable demand, the slogan '*Gashin shôtan*' (Let us accept extreme privations in order to prepare our revenge) became very popular in Japan, a saying that expresses very well the Japanese people's inferiority complex at that time, as well as their aggressiveness not only towards westerners but also, and especially, towards their Asian neighbours.

But neither do I share the view that *Madame Butterfly* is a universal work of art. For it is well known that Puccini had a deep interest in the music of Japan as well as other aspects of its culture: he bought recordings of Japanese music and learnt several Japanese tunes, which he was taught personally by Madame Oyama, the wife of a Japanese diplomat in Rome, pieces which he in fact used in several passages of *Madame Butterfly*. In addition the circumstances of the opera's creation clearly explain his appreciation of Japan. Puccini first took an interest in Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), but the story had already been transposed for the stage by André Messager, who had made it into an operetta (1893). Then he was attracted by the play by David Belasco *Madame Butterfly*, which he saw by chance in London in May 1900 during his brief visit there to attend the première of *Tosca*. But Belasco based the play (premiered in New York in 1900) on a story by an American lawyer, John Luther Long (1898), who had himself taken his inspiration from *Madame Chrysanthème*, but using a true story he had been told by his elder sister, who was then living in Nagasaki and had heard it there. Indeed Long's story does not end in Cio-Cio-San's suicide; its last sentence is: 'When Mrs Pinkerton called next day at the little house on Higashi Hill [Cio-Cio-San's house], it was quite empty.' When Puccini initially became interested in Loti's novel, it was not at all the love tragedy with a

universal scope that attracted him, but rather the exoticism evoked by a young Japanese girl's fleeting love affair with a sailor from the West. In the end, however, it is true also that, because of the magnificent quality of the music, Puccini's opera takes on the universal character of a love tragedy.

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As far as the east–west contrast is concerned, what interests me in the circumstances surrounding the opera's genesis is the strange mixture of enthusiasm for the exotic attraction of Japan on the one hand and contempt for, even discrimination against, the Japanese on the other, which seems to me to express more generally westerners' ambivalent attitude to those from the East.

In Pierre Loti's three books on Japan, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), *Japoneries d'automne* (1889) and *La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune* (1905), this ambivalence is noticeable. Loti was very conscious of his appreciation of a certain beauty in Japan, but at the same time how often did he compare the Japanese to monkeys? In *Madame Chrysanthème*, immediately he arrives in Nagasaki during the summer of 1885, when he is choosing a mistress as if he were in a slave market, he exclaims to the pimp: 'She's very young! And too white; she's like our French women, and I wanted a yellow woman for a change.' Finally he chooses Chrysanthème (Okane-san), who is 18, because she is a virgin. But immediately after 'marrying' her, he writes that she has no soul and he 'finds her as exasperating as the cicadas on [his] roof'. Then again: 'As I was about to leave I could only find it in me to smile slightly mockingly at these hordes of miserable people . . . disfigured by constitutional insipidity, inherited junk and incorrigible mannerisms . . .'. After reading this, was Puccini really keen to write an opera based on the story?

When Loti wrote the journal entitled *La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune*, during his brief visit to Japan in late 1900 and early 1901, on the occasion of the French fleet's arrival in the Far East in response to the Boxer (*Yihequan*) uprising, he saw people preparing for war with Russia. He wrote: 'War is becoming inevitable and getting closer . . . it may break out tomorrow . . . so determined on it is each little yellow brain; the meanest porter on the streets is talking about it as if it had begun, and confidently expecting victory.' 'Everything is focused on war at the moment, on preparations for this great tilt at Russia – which will in fact be only the first manifestation of the huge Yellow Peril.'

I am tempted to compare these lines with those written by another French author in May 1904, shortly after the outbreak of the war between Russia and Japan and the première of the opera *Madame Butterfly* in Italy: 'Now we are discovering the yellow peril. For many years Asians have experienced the white peril. The sack of the Summer Palace, the Peking massacres, the Blagovetchensk drownings, the break-up of China, are these not matters of concern for the Chinese? And did the Japanese feel safe facing the Port Arthur cannon? We have created the white peril. And the white peril has created the yellow peril' (Anatole France, 'Sur la pierre blanche, IV').

Calmly but firmly articulated, these words show us the foolishness of an ego-centric, exclusive and one-sided viewpoint. I do not think the situation has improved at all as regards mutual understanding, not only between East and West but also

between Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, the industrialized and the underdeveloped nations, the overfed and the hungry . . . What is certain is that first a realization of the differences between each party, and then a meeting between each different party, is essential. However, a dialogue between two opposing parties cannot lead to a productive result: it is even likely to increase antagonism. This is why I have always been in favour of a 'trialogue', that is, a meeting between three parties with significant differences. Basing your thinking on three reference points is an effective way of relativizing and objectivizing one of the three viewpoints, your own included: this is the method I have called triangulating cultures, on the model of the procedure used in geodesics. If the total number of parties involved exceeds three, the discussions are likely to be untidy and inefficient.⁵

As I have demonstrated above with some examples, the simplistic 'East versus West' dichotomy does not reflect reality; and so it is unproductive as a prelude to discussions. Now that we are living in the age of the global village, we need to factor into those discussions the viewpoint of the South in order to achieve a triangulation of cultures on a worldwide scale.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. François Bordes, *Typologie du Paléolithique Ancien et Moyen*, Paris, CNRS, 1960, pp. 69–70.
2. Takeru Akazawa, 'Introduction: human evolution, dispersals and adaptive strategies', in Takeru Akazawa and Emöke J. E. Szathmary (eds), *Prehistoric Mongoloid Dispersals*, Oxford/New York/Tokyo, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 1–37.
3. Junzo Kawada, 'Victimes ou agresseurs? A propos des émigrants japonais de l'époque contemporaine', in Françoise Barret-Ducrocq (ed.), *Migrations et errances*, Paris, Grasset, 2000, pp. 234–9.
4. Olivier Horn, *Kiju Yoshida rencontre Madame Butterfly*, Paris, Sépia production, 1993 (Grand Premier Prix, 17th UNESCO International Festival of Art Films).
5. Junzo Kawada, 'Beyond Cultural Relativism and Globalism: A Proposal to Deepen Cultural Awareness through "Trialogues"', in *Dialogue of Civilizations: Cultural Diversity in the Organization of Global Society*, Tokyo, United Nations University (forthcoming).