

# The Renaissance of Asia

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The honour of being invited to address this Conference is more than I deserve. I think it a privilege to attend an American Conference on Asian Affairs and to hear of all the good work being done, and especially one held in the Midwest. During World War II, there were foreigners so ignorant of the United States as to suppose that the eastern states were at war with Germany, the far western states with Japan, and some states in the middle as yet unaware that any conflict was in progress, or that any other countries could actually exist. Such an opinion was a travesty of the fact, but had behind it (dare I suggest?) some faint reflection of what might once have been the truth. I doubt whether the original faculty of this University was much aware of Asia or could have been readily convinced that Asian languages or affairs would ever be studied on their campus. They were aware, to be sure, that there were heathen in the world awaiting conversion. They had been urged to support missionary endeavour, and they may even have made their modest contributions towards it. They might have imagined an Asian world in need of instruction. I doubt whether they could have pictured an Asian world from which they could have anything to learn.

Our attitude today is different, and I am going to give my own tentative explanation of why this appears to be so. Why do we regard Asian studies as important, even here in Illinois? To this some would reply that the world is shrinking and that Asia is nearer to Chicago (that great seaport) than was formerly the case. While there is truth in that explanation, it does not account for our choice of Asia rather than Africa.

To understand our sudden awareness of Asia we must go back in history, back to the point at which all history used to begin: the

Siege of Troy. In the Iliad we have our first detailed account of a conflict between East and West, one which took place astride the then principal trade route between Europe and Asia. We have no reason to suppose that the opposing forces were significantly different from each other in character or outlook. However, by the time the pendulum had swung the other way, the contrast was becoming apparent. When they attacked Greece, the Persians were Orientals, and they were opposed by Greeks who had become consciously and deliberately western. Next we have Alexander's invasion of India, his reputation going so far ahead of him that Malays are given the name Iskander to this day, little knowing how the word originated. He was followed by the Romans, in their turn swinging eastward, once more astride the trade route, and again consciously European. Come to a later period and we find the forces of the East, spearheaded by the fanaticism of Islam, surging westwards along the North African shore, and so into Spain and eventually into France. Then began the ebb tide of Islam, with lands recovered for Christendom, and that revival of the West we call the Renaissance. A flood of western expansion, more massive than any previous movement of the kind, poured either way round the world, meeting in the China Seas and reaching its furthest extent in about 1900. By 1905 the tide had turned. Today the tide is beginning to run the other way.

You will notice that I have used the word "Renaissance," referring to something that took place in the Europe of 1200-1500, earlier or later. This is a term I need to clarify before using it, as I propose to do, in a different context. I have seen books in which historians exhausted their erudition (and their readers' patience) in an effort to prove that the Middle Ages ended, not in 1493, but in 1520 or 1525. I have seen yet other works in which the meaning of the Renaissance is pitilessly expounded and defined. In volume after gloomy volume the shape of renascent Europe has been revealed with all the anatomical gusto of a sixteenth-century etching. To my wayward mind, most of these scholars miss the point of what was happening. As I see it, the Middle Ages represent a period in European history during which the West was under the strongest oriental influence. The Medieval European looked towards Asia as a region of more advanced civilisation, which of course it was. There was nothing strange to him in the legend of the wise

men coming from the East. From where else could they come? But while he and his churches all looked to the East, he also looked back towards an earlier period of history, the period during which western civilisation had been at once superior to his and superior to that of the Orient. Admitting his present inadequacies, the medieval schoolman could remind himself that things had been different in the days of Aristotle and Alexander. When a certain point of development had been reached, Europeans came to realise that they had surpassed the Orient in technical achievement. They were at once different and better. To emphasize the difference and illustrate the superiority, they harked back to all that outwardly characterised that earlier period when this had last been true. In rebelling against much that was oriental in their own society, they would imitate the ancient Greeks, who had done exactly the same thing. The secret of being distinctively European could be found only among the ruined columns and surviving manuscripts of the ancient world. With that cultural kinship established, they could go forth to conquer the world, which was roughly what they did.

In the Middle Ages, oriental influence predominated in Europe; but in what we call modern times (1500-1900), western influence predominated in Asia. It is easy to see that this was the fact. What is by no means as easy is to explain why this alternation should occur, or in what its main contrasts can be held to consist. Before attempting any such explanation, I must emphasise, first of all, that the movement I have described, the pendulum swinging between East and West, has never been a purely military phenomenon. The appearance of Alexander on the Indus, like the death of Roland in the Pyrenees, represents in sharp focus a whole movement in which military operations played only a part. In either case the movement of expansion included a pressure of economic forces, of technological developments, of intellectual concepts, of religious and cultural ideas. In studying such movements as these, we have to note the achievements of merchants, explorers, missionaries, teachers, scientists, engineers, thinkers, and poets. And the movements are bigger, it would seem, than the sum of these individual contributions. When the westward expansion of the United States—itsself an extension of Europe's westward movement—built up a pressure in the Mississippi basin, when it burst into the Caribbean, broke through the slender land barrier of Panama, and

carried the American flag to Hawaii and Manila, projecting American missionaries into the heart of China, the whole movement of the offensive was beyond the scope of any individual to plan, or even to conceive. It was "a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood," could lead to an American domination of the Far East, or else to a clash with the British, who had reached the same area by a simultaneous movement in the opposite direction. What I want to emphasise is that it was the Americans who were trying to turn the Chinese into good Methodists or Baptists, not the Chinese who were preaching Confucianism in Los Angeles or Seattle. It was the Americans who were threatening China with the Harvard Yen-ching classification of Chinese literature, not the Chinese who were attempting to discover whether Longfellow existed or whether he was a myth of tolemistic origin. From the British angle, it was British archaeologists who came to burrow under Egyptian pyramids, not Egyptian experts who came to investigate Stonehenge. The basic fact is that it was Europeans who discovered the East (in modern times), not Asians who discovered Europe, or, for that matter, America. There was no technical reason why the Chinese should not have discovered Portugal, writing articles on the subject for their own journals of anthropology. But they never went further than East Africa. They were not, therefore, in a position to discover the queer customs of the natives. They were not then, it would seem, in the mood for exploration or discovery. They were on the defensive, as it were, and left world exploration to others. The Great Wall of China, like the Maginot Line in France, represents a mood of conscious inferiority. Such a basic lack of tactical enterprise is always wrapped up, of course, in drivel about cultural values and contemporary art.

Why should the pendulum of initiative swing thus between East and West? While I am unwilling to guess publicly how it began, I am aware of some forces which serve at least to keep it in motion. For the pressure of one civilisation upon another clearly compresses certain emotional springs, producing, first, a state of tension and, second, a vigorous thrust in the opposite direction. The greater the pressure, the greater the recoil. You might suspect at first that the strongest pressure would take the form of brutal oppression, savage penalties, economic exploitation, and gunboat diplomacy. I do not think that it does. The British have produced the strongest reaction

by a policy of philanthropy mingled with condescension. I am not concerned to deny that the British have been ruthless on occasion, as when suppressing the Indian Mutiny. All I suggest is that our good intentions have earned us more hostility than our ruthlessness ever did. The sad fact is that an aloof superiority is more unpopular when the superiority is real than when it is assumed. British experience suggests a number of ways in which a subject population can be driven to exasperation. I will mention three of them. One way is to display an intense interest in a country's archaeological monuments, subtly contrasting this with an inability even to notice its present inhabitants. A second way is to become so expert in the local idiom that you fail people in examinations for not knowing their own language, or at least for not knowing the grammar which you have invented for them. A third way is to treat the inhabitants with the gentle and amused tolerance that the English first practiced on Ireland. Mingle all this with a habit of being consistently right and you soon create an atmosphere of smouldering resentment.

The danger in being effortlessly superior, more energetic, more capable, more courageous, and more honest than anyone else is that the local people with whom you have to work develop an automatic respect for you, as a result of which they despise themselves. The mischief of this is that their resentment is to that extent incurable. The better your conduct, the more angry their reaction. Even if you succeed in breaking down the barriers of self-pity and misunderstanding, you find that the friendship which you have personally established is less important than the hostility felt towards the white man as such. This abstract resentment is quite compatible with friendship, and indeed with an affection felt for every single European the individual may have met. The bitterest opponents of Britain are those, almost without exception, who have received the most. To look for thanks may be natural, but it is not intelligent.

All this is a digression. The fact remains that the pressure of one people upon another, whatever its form and however benevolent, produces an active resentment, and it is this, I suggest, that keeps the pendulum going. Granted then, that there exists such an alternation of influences as I have tried to describe, we do well to interest ourselves in the affairs of Asia. For these are going to mat-

ter increasingly. We cannot afford to ignore them as our grandfathers could. In studying the revival of Asia we are trying to understand one of the most important events—perhaps *the* most important event—of our time. I have tried to show its historical significance. It remains, in the time available, to suggest what else there is to learn. It consists, I would urge, of three things: the meaning of the East, the meaning of the West, and the value of their interaction.

Take their interaction first. It is a commonplace of world history that parts of the world most fertile in ideas have been those on the borderline between different civilisations. Syria and Palestine have been such areas, for example, and places like Alexandria, Cairo, and Venice have been important in their day. If this be so, and if we agree that the spark of invention has been caused by the striking, as it were, of steel on flint, it follows that the steel and flint must differ in substance. If I attempt to define what we mean by western as opposed to oriental, I can thus hope to have your initial agreement that the difference is there. It is not a clear-cut distinction, for neither type of civilisation exists (or perhaps has ever existed) in an unmixed form. To me, nevertheless, there are differences capable of definition. I propose to mention no more than three of these, those which seem to me basic.

The first difference concerns the distinct character of the individual. When the first clash occurred between Greeks and Persians it was already clear that the Greeks were so many individuals, their opponents so many family or kinship groups. The Greeks were fewer, to begin with, and had no wish to become more numerous. Individuality is possible perhaps only when the numbers are reasonably small. Be that as it may, this basic difference persists. The American who marries a Chinese girl finds that he has married into a Chinese clan. She is not an individual in the sense that he is. The same consideration underlies a Hindu marriage in which the parents have chosen the bride for their son. Within the framework of caste and clan, the units are largely standardised.

The second difference is religious. All revealed religions come from the East, and specifically those with the widest support, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Marxism. In many of these there is a strong emphasis on a future life. In the western tradition, by contrast, the other world plays a relatively

small part. The European or American sometimes pays lip service to the concept of heaven and hell, but shows by his conduct that his main concern is with the world he can see. The Egyptian pyramids were the work of people who believed in the gods. The New York skyscrapers are the work, essentially, of people who believe mainly in themselves. The mysteries of religion are known to the West, but play there a relatively small part. The West, significantly, has no religion of its own.

The third difference is in the cult of proportion and simplicity, as compared with the cult of elaboration and contrast. In oriental life there is the continual juxtaposition of extremes: the fat Buddha, the ascetic saint; the king in robes and the beggar in rags; the sage and the simpleton; the orgy and the self-denying penance; the harem and the monastery; the ecstasy in triumph and the ritual suicide of defeat; the life of action and the life of contemplation; the enlightenment of the blessed and the tortures of the damned. The western and republican tradition implies an ideal not of contrast but of proportion; a balance to be struck between asceticism and excess, between learning and ignorance, between the athletic and the intellectual, between wealth and poverty, between virtue and vice. What is distinctively European in architecture or art achieves its effect by the nicety of its proportions. Whether in a classic elevation, a nude statue, a planned city, or a portrait in oils, the typically western achievement is one of restraint, elegance, and order. And the ideal of European and American legend—the gentleman of fiction—combines in himself the character of scholar, soldier, business man, farmer, and poet. In the idealised hero the several ingredients are nicely rationed, his scholarship being not pedantic, his soldiering not brutal, his finance not grasping, his outlook not bucolic, and his verse not too free. Behind all this nice adjustment there is, first and foremost, a sense of proportion.

Today, with Asia renascent, we may expect to see a decline in the importance of the individual, the onset of a new and intolerant religion, and a new demand for dramatically contrasting colours and shapes, light and darkness, height and depth. It may be that some movement of the kind is already perceptible, as we might see that the crowd in the football stadium is already flecked with scarlet. If our first reaction is one of dismay, let us recall once more that past progress has not resulted from isolation but from the

clash of ideas. In the very noblest achievements of thought and art there is room, it would often seem, for the opposites—for individual inspiration and for mass effort, for religious dedication and intellectual strength, for simplicity of design combined with elaboration of detail. There are cathedrals, symphonies, and literary masterpieces in which the opposites are tensely reconciled.

Do not imagine, however, that you will ever see, or that our children will ever see, a world in which all cultural differences have been smoothed out and made easily compatible. No such world is likely or even desirable. Sharp differences are essential if we are to remain mentally alert, and it is a question whether the differences *within* the United States are nearly sharp enough. We may hope that the struggle between East and West may not be a conflict of arms; but we must not suppose that there will cease to be a conflict of ideas. In this country a favourite word in current use is the word "relax." I venture to suggest, in closing, that we can relax too much and too often. If the arrow of the highest achievement is to hit the centre of the target, there must be tension. There must be a moment, at least, when the bowstring must be unbearably taut; when the strain, if prolonged, would be agony. Comes the moment of release and the thrill of achievement. Without the previous tension, the thrill is unobtainable. In the current American scene there is an absence of strain, a tendency to relax, an urge to enjoy what is called "good living." Is this movement of Asia a threat to our way of life? Of course it is; and I, for one, have no regrets. For the one enemy left, when every comfort has been provided, is the deadliest of all—boredom. When I was living in Asia, I was often exasperated, annoyed, and tired; but never bored. With discomfort, danger, effort, and strain there was always interest. That is one reason why I welcome the renaissance of Asia. If it did not exist we should have to invent it. For American comfort, insulated from Asia, would be, to my mind, unbearably dull. In past years Asia needed an invasion of western ideas. Today we need a reascent Asia to bring us back to life.