

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



“Eurasia is once again the subject of geopolitics” - © The Economist

East is East and West is West

Georges M. Halpern, MD, DSc

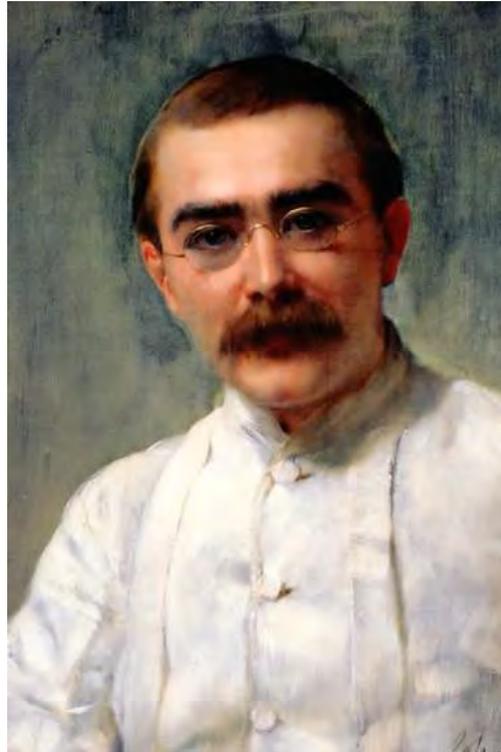
with Yves P. Huin

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



“Oh, East is East, and West is West...”

Rudyard Kipling, 1889



Portrait of Rudyard Kipling by John Collier - © The Spectator, UK

Its first line is often quoted, sometimes to ascribe racism to Kipling, particularly regarding the British Empire. Those who quote it thus often completely miss the third and fourth lines. The full refrain, with which the poem opens and closes, includes a contradiction of the opening line:

*“Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of
the earth!”*

This may be read as saying that *“it is indisputable that geographic points of the*

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



compass will never meet in this life, but that when two strong men [or equals] meet, the accidents of birth, whether of nationality, race, or family, do not matter at all -the mutual respect such individuals have, each for the character, prowess, and integrity of the other, are their only criteria for judging and accepting one another. Any differences in ethnicity between such individuals are never even considered. “

Joseph Rudyard Kipling was born on 30 December 1865 in Bombay, India. *“Kipling’s parents considered themselves ‘Anglo-Indians’ [a term used in the 19th century for people of British origin living in India] and so too would their son, though he spent the bulk of his life elsewhere. Complex issues of identity and national allegiance would become prominent in his fiction”* (Bernice M. Murphy).

After studying in England, Kipling worked from 1883 to 1889 in British India for local newspapers and returned to London via San Francisco and traveled through the United States in 1869. He met –and was impressed by- Mark Twain, who passed along literary advice: *“Get your facts first and then you can distort ‘em as much as you please”*. Kipling lived –and worked! - in many countries, including long stays in the United States; he suffered numerous familial dramas and losses, but he was a successful author: in 1907, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature: *“In consideration of the power of observation, originality of imagination, virility of ideas and remarkable talent for narration which characterize the creations of this world-famous author”*. The Swedish Academy, in awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature this year to Rudyard Kipling, desires to pay *“a tribute of homage to the literature of England, so rich in manifold glories, and to the greatest genius in the realm of narrative that that country has produced in our times.”*

Kipling was also a very active Freemason and memorialized its ideals in his famous poem *The Mother Lodge*.

His legacy has been mixed, and best summarized in 1942 by George Orwell in *Horizon*: *“One reason for Kipling’s power [was] his sense of responsibility, which made it possible for him to have a world-view, even though it happened to be a false one. Although he had no direct connection with any political party, Kipling was a Conservative, a thing that does not exist nowadays. Those who now call themselves Conservatives are either Liberals, Fascists or the accomplices of Fascists. He identified himself with the ruling power and not with the opposition. In a gifted writer, this seems to us strange and even disgusting, but it did have the advantage of giving Kipling a*

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



certain grip on reality. The ruling power is always faced with the question, 'In such and such circumstances, what would you do?', whereas the opposition is not obliged to take responsibility or make any real decisions. Where it is a permanent and pensioned opposition, as in England, the quality of its thought deteriorates accordingly. Moreover, anyone who starts out with a pessimistic, reactionary view of life tends to be justified by events, for Utopia never arrives and 'the gods of the copybook headings', as Kipling himself put it, always return. Kipling sold out to the British governing class, not financially but emotionally. This warped his political judgement, for the British ruling class were not what he imagined, and it led him into abysses of folly and snobbery, but he gained a corresponding advantage from having at least tried to imagine what action and responsibility are like. It is a great thing in his favor that he is not witty, not 'daring', has no wish to 'épater les bourgeois.' He dealt largely in platitudes, and since we live in a world of platitudes, much of what he said sticks. Even his worst follies seem less shallow and less irritating than the 'enlightened' utterances of the same period, such as Wilde's epigrams or the collection of cracker-mottoes at the end of Man and Superman."

Why Kipling? Why Now?

George Orwell's opinion piece points to a direction that is still very current. Two recent articles triggered my recent revived interest, symbolized by the first 2 verses of *Ballad of East and West*: one in *Foreign Policy*, by Bruno Maçães (December 7, 2018); the other in *The Atlantic* by Jeffrey Wasserstrom (December 9, 2018).

I am copying them below.



A Preview of Your Chinese Future

China's vision of world order is a more radical departure—and more realistic alternative—than the West understands.

(Foreign Policy)



Clouds above the Shanghai skyline on July 31, 2014 - © Johannes Eisele/AFP/Getty Images

“The year is 2049, one hundred years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The Belt and Road Initiative is complete. That does not mean it will stop or disappear. It is concluded in the same way a bridge or a road is built. Its development is finished, and it is ready to start working or operating at full power.

“Some of the infrastructure projects are truly stunning and now stand as the highest example of what human ingenuity can achieve in its drive to master natural forces. A

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



bridge crossing the Caspian Sea -125 miles, from Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan- has made road transport between Europe and China fast and easy, changing old mental maps that separated continents. The Kra Isthmus Canal in Thailand has done the same for the Indian and Pacific oceans. No longer do we think of them as two separate oceans. In Africa, a high-speed railway connects the two coasts, traversing Djibouti, Ethiopia, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Cameroon in under twenty hours. Trade between Africa, Asia, and South America increasingly uses this route.

“New cities have grown in once desolate or forbidding landscapes, many in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. They have already gone through many stages of transformation: from logistics hubs ravaged by crime and corruption to booming metropolises attracting vast influxes of migrants and refugees spurned by the United States and the European Union, and then finally to economic powerhouses with low regulation, where successive technological revolutions take no more than a few years. Many of the new cities have sizable Chinese populations. These Chinese expats are the entrepreneurs and investment bankers, the trendsetters and technology prophets. Mandarin has largely replaced English as the international lingua franca.”

This is how a Chinese world order might appear when looked from a distance -in our case, the distance of the past. But beyond its technical achievements, does China's vision for the future still represent a recognizable world? Is it a break from the current world order in some fundamental way? Or is it still the world we live in today, only more balanced and more divided between different economic poles in Europe, Asia, and America -a continuation of the sort of globalization we have come to know? Some observers believe the latter. In her own *“speculative leap into Eurasia's future,”* Nadège Rolland describes a world where people do not *“Google,”* have a Facebook or Twitter account, or watch the news on CNN or the BBC. Instead, they *“Baidu,”* use Weibo for their social connections, and watch China Global Television Network. Children do not play *“cowboys and Indians”* but mimic the exploits of the Monkey King, one of their favorite heroes from the Journey to the West tale. The description is of course inspired by the existing world order and tries to project a future where China has replaced the United States, but the essential shape of things -institutions, values, and relations- remains largely unmodified. The differences are limited to what China lacks by contrast to the current ruler of the system; here, Rolland mentions freedom of speech and individual rights.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



Similarly, Jonathan Holslag imagines a future Asian order replicating more or less perfectly the European order we know from the last few decades, with China occupying the core, as Germany and France do in Europe. The area from Shanghai to Chengdu and from Shenyang to Kunming has turned into a densely developed zone, saturated with the middle classes and boasting advanced industries, internationally renowned brands, and quality services. Fast trains and airlines channel millions of tourists to quiet or quaint places: to Tibet, emerging as the Chinese Pyrenees; to the Northeast, the future Chinese Alps; to Xinjiang, the new Andalusia; and to the southern beaches, China's Mediterranean. China's new multinationals have tied all other Asian countries to the motherland by means of roads, railways, pipelines, and financial flows. Japan's fate could be compared to a depopulating version of the United Kingdom, quietly musing on its glorious past. Southeast Asia, China's Italy, is vibrant and enthralling, yet heavily penetrated by Chinese companies, banks, and high livers. The stretch from Bangladesh to Kazakhstan could well be called China's northern Africa and Middle East ...

All this is unlikely. The kind of transformation China envisions would change everything. The system itself would be differently organized, and the goals and values inspiring it would be radically different. The new world would not be one where one piece on the chessboard would be replaced, nor even one where the pieces would be reorganized. It would be a world built anew by very different people and according to very different ideas. David Rennie, Beijing bureau chief for *The Economist*, gets somewhat closer to the truth in his forecasting exercise, projected to 2024. Like Rolland, Rennie starts by imagining a dystopian negation of the West. China's intelligence services, working with the country's technology firms, have turned millions of cars in America, Europe, and Asia into remote spying devices, letting Beijing track vehicles in real time and identify passengers with facial recognition technology. A new international organization, the Global Infrastructure Center, decides which schemes are eligible for billions of dollars in Chinese loans and grants, and picks foreign firms as partners using opaque rules devised by Communist Party planners. But Rennie goes on to describe how the new Chinese-led global economic order is based on fundamentally different ideas and principles. New international courts have been created, and they draw no distinction between nations with state-directed and market economies. Its judges take a benign view of subsidies that claim to support national development and believe that sovereign

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



governments, rather than individual businesses, should have the final say in patent disputes. *“Rarely mounting direct challenges, China has instead tested, probed and introduced ambiguities into every aspect of global governance. Established powers have not so much acquiesced as proved too weary to resist.”*

Still, dystopian frameworks are generally unhelpful when thinking about China’s rise. They are predicated on the supposition of a wholesale collapse of the Western political order, a scenario that seems unlikely at present and seems bound to remain unlikely. There are many reasons one cannot extrapolate from China’s extraordinary rise over the past four decades to the shape of future events and developments. First, the challenges China faces now during its continued rise will be fundamentally different in nature: political more than economic, with security concerns raising their ugly heads. Meanwhile, that very rise or expansion creates new variables -reactions, responses, changes of attitude- as other countries increasingly regard China as a threat or, at the very least, a competitor. Moreover, our current historical juncture crucially differs from others in the sense that China’s rise does not depend on a technological breakthrough which will remain inaccessible to the West. This is the point where parallels with the corresponding moment in the 18th and 19th centuries -when the West rose to global preeminence- must stop. The new world order toward which we are moving is not one where there is a clear center, but rather one distinguished by the search for balance between different poles. So, when we describe a new Chinese world order, we must keep in mind there will be other shareholders, other shapers, and other balancers. The West will diminish in reach and influence, but 30 years from now it will continue to offer a powerful alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, even if it may also be expected to evolve in response to the Chinese challenge.



The Death of Democracy in Hong Kong

Four years later, it's clear that the reforms advocated by 2014's youth-led, pro-democracy protest movement won't take shape. (*The Atlantic*)



Joshua Wong stands in front of yellow umbrellas, the symbol of the 2014 Hong Kong protests, ahead of a 2015 court hearing - © Vincent Yu / AP

“You remember me!”

“I couldn't help laughing when Joshua Wong said those words to me, as I walked up to shake his hand after a small protest gathering, he had helped organize broke up. It seemed a supremely strange comment to come from the mouth of the 21-year-old activist, whose face had been featured in television newscasts worldwide and had graced the cover of *Time* during Hong Kong's 2014 protests. We had met twice before this most recent brief encounter. A local historian who knew of my scholarly interest

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



in protest movements introduced me to Joshua in 2013, when he was only 15 but already well known in the city for the leading role he had played in a successful effort to keep mainland-style patriotic education out of Hong Kong high schools.

“We then spent an hour talking in a coffee shop in 2016, at a time when many had come to see Hong Kong’s protests, dubbed the Umbrella Movement for the object protesters used to shield their faces from tear gas and pepper spray, as a failure. Not only had they been unable to achieve their stated goal of expanding democratic procedures in Hong Kong, but a general sense had taken hold that repression was on the rise in a city whose local authorities were beholden to Beijing.

“Along with those meetings, I have written essays about Joshua’s actions and the way the local authorities have tried to silence him. I’ve seen three documentaries dealing with him, and in one of these, *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*, I appear as a commentator.

“How could I not remember Joshua?

“You remember me!”

“I wondered at first whether he was intentionally being silly when he smiled and said those three words, but I quickly dismissed that possibility. Just before he noticed me walking toward him, he looked burned out and downcast. And there had been no frivolous moments during our two previous encounters. Serious, smart, dedicated, determined: These were adjectives I associated with him, but not silly. Even if trying to amuse me was the furthest thing from his mind when he spoke, I chuckled over his words right after he said them. I laughed again several times during the rest of my week in Hong Kong as I told friends about our meeting, turning it into a comic anecdote. A few days after leaving the city and returning to California, though, I stopped finding his comment funny. Instead, I started to feel a sense of heartbreak.

“It doesn’t take much to make me laugh, but I don’t cry easily. So, it was a bit of a shock when, thinking back to seeing him while I rode my bike to the gym one morning, I felt tears welling up in my eyes. At the time, I couldn’t figure out why I felt like crying. I now know that I was not just shedding tears for a young man I barely know. I was also mourning the demise of a special place. I was lamenting the slow death of Hong Kong, or rather of a particular Hong Kong. A Hong Kong that was supposed to be able to enjoy a variety of distinctive freedoms relating to speech and

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



assembly for 50 years after becoming integrated into the People's Republic of China under the terms of a "*one country, two systems*" arrangement. A Hong Kong that has been altered by seemingly unstoppable processes that have transformed the difference between its way of life and that of urban centers across the border from a chasm to a gap.

"That Hong Kong is not just in its death throes but is imagined by some to have already died. This could explain why Joshua's face lit up when I approached him. There is good cause for activists like him, famous or not, to be heartened by any sign that people who do not live in Hong Kong continue to care. That efforts to stem, at least partially and at least for a time, the city's becoming more like an ordinary part of the mainland have not gone unnoticed.

"You remember me!"

"Those words don't haunt me as regularly as they did on the first day, I cried thinking about Joshua saying them, but I still think back from time to time to that evening when he said them and find the memory heartbreaking. Often, I recall them when I mention how worried I am about the ongoing tightening of controls on Hong Kong and, more often than not, am met with a blank stare.

"I don't blame the people I am talking to for being unaware. The news cycle has been relentless, distracting, distressing. I've learned not to be surprised when news from China that seems urgent and important to me doesn't register deeply in the United States, or takes far too long to make an impression, as happened with reports of the widening network of indoctrination camps in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. And with Hong Kong, the eventual disappearance of the city's special status can easily seem old news, a *fait accompli*. And yet, not being surprised and not being saddened aren't the same. I was saddened by the news that three organizers of Occupy Central With Peace and Love, the 2014 struggle that morphed over time into the Umbrella Movement, are going on trial. The trio -two senior professors and a 74-year-old reverend- simply called for nonviolent acts of civil disobedience of the sort that were supposed to be acceptable in a "*one country, two systems*" framework. Yet their case remains under the radar for many people I know and seems likely to end with them being sentenced to seven years in prison.

"I was saddened when a group of booksellers was kidnapped for producing works

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



on the private lives of top Chinese Communist Party leaders, a story that seemed to gain little traction in the United States. I was saddened when a foreign journalist, for the first time, had a request for a routine extension of a work visa denied, without explanation, and then was blocked from coming to the city as a tourist. His only apparent transgression: having played host at a talk that the local authorities, eager to please Beijing, wish had not taken place.

“You remember me!”

“Joshua Wong is not forgotten. There are still some people like me outside Hong Kong who remember him, and there are still some in the territory who need him -or, at least, need some of the things he has come to symbolize. And yet, one reason he was probably sad just before I went up to him was that -because of a mixture of factors, from fear or exhaustion with protesting to the limited methods of spreading word of what was happening- only a small group of people had answered the call he’d put out for a crowd to join him at the protest.

“Even the promise that the event would include appearances by a pair of famous visitors -two members of the Russian group Pussy Riot who were in the territory to take part in LGBT-rights activities- had failed to get more than a handful of people to turn out. I will probably never know what Joshua was thinking when he said the three words that have stuck with me. I am pretty sure that he wasn’t trying to make me laugh or trying to make me cry. But with three simple words, he managed to make me do both.

*[Personal: Yes, Joshua, **I do remember you**: we met then, during the exhilarating, dream-like, series of nights, when you and the thousands of Hong Kongers –not all students- thought that you could ‘make the world a better place’, ignore the Imperial Dragon, the World Order, and blind-out the lessons of the Tien An Men massacre. You see Joshua, Dreamers are like poets or artists: they see, they imagine, they wish the world with their own senses. We need them to bring beauty and hope. But the World is run by money –and the ones who have it and will never share it, by their slaves and sycophants, their whores and torturers, by their puppet judges and voters addicted to Fox News or CCTV Channels. Yes, Joshua, **I do remember you** because **I was you once upon a time...** And, like Jeffrey Wasserstrom, I did cry then, and many times before, long ago, and now again when I must deal with what you fought against and hated – but that crushed you and me -earlier.]*



Anarchism

I claim to be an *anarchist*, and always has felt like one. The word "*anarchism*" is derived from the Greek ἀναρχία, i.e. *anarchy* (from ἄναρχος, *anarchos*, meaning "one without rulers"). The first known use of this word was in 1539.

The earliest anarchist themes can be found in the 6th century BCE among the works of Daoist philosopher Laozi and in later centuries by Zhuangzi and Bao Jingyan. Zhuangzi's philosophy has been described by various sources as anarchist. Zhuangzi wrote: "*A petty thief is put in jail. A great brigand becomes a ruler of a Nation*" (Did he anticipate Donald J. Trump?). Jesus is sometimes considered the first anarchist in the Christian tradition. Georges Lechartier wrote: "*The true founder of anarchy was Jesus Christ and [...] the first anarchist society was that of the apostles*". In early Islamic history, some manifestations of anarchic thought are found during the Islamic civil war over the Caliphate, where the Kharijites insisted that the imamate is a right for each individual within the Islamic society. The French Renaissance political philosopher Étienne de La Boétie wrote in his most famous work the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* what some historians consider an important anarchist precedent. And I elaborated in some of my previous essays on this topic.



The Creation by Michel Angelo – © beliefnet.com



Abrahamic Religions

Anarchy hence and by essence is *atheistic* (despite a possible Jesus stint). It opposes the core, the definition, the *raison d'être* of **Abrahamic Religions**, also referred to collectively as **Abrahamism**.

These are a group of Semitic-originated religious communities of faith that claim descent from the Judaism of the ancient Israelites and the worship of the God of Abraham. The Abrahamic religions are monotheistic religions: they worship only one god, the unique God. The term derives from patriarch Abraham, a major biblical figure from *The Old Testament*, which is recognized by Christians, Muslims and others.

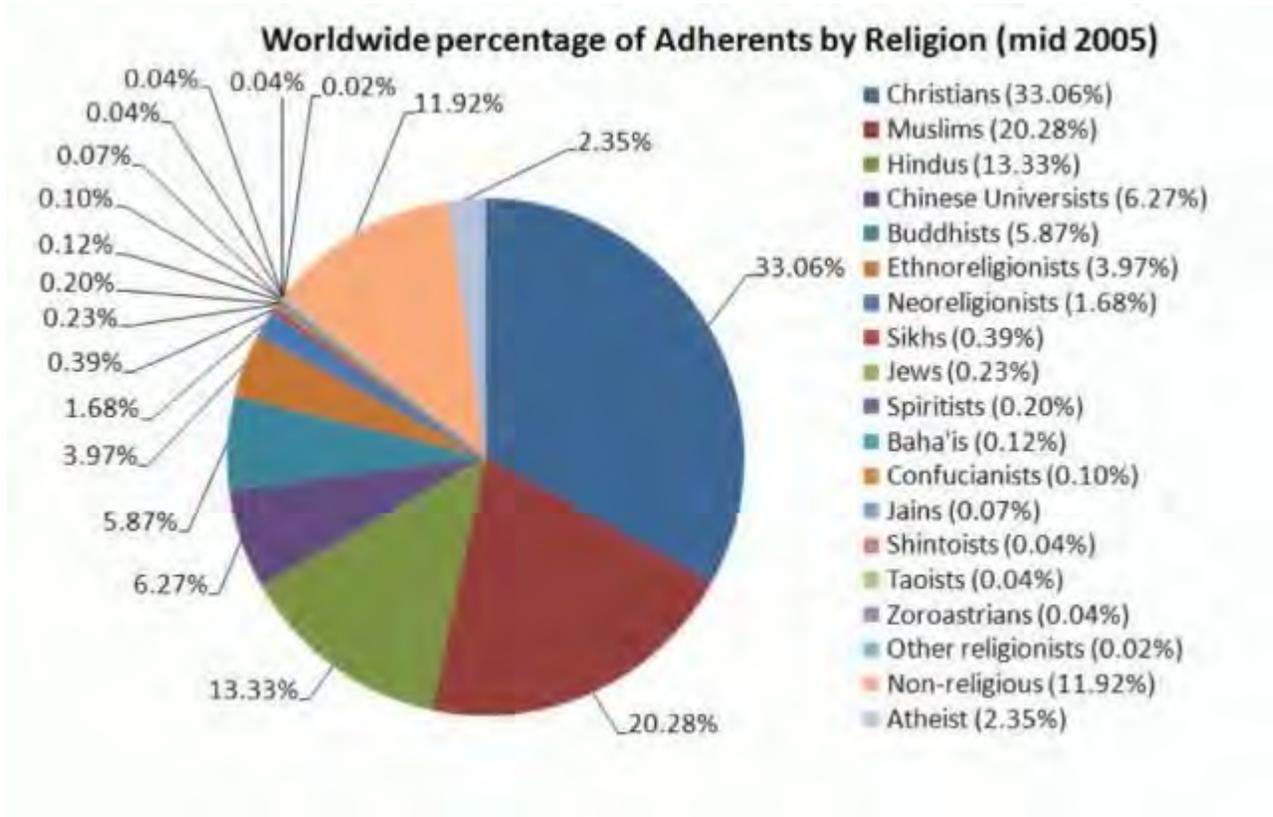
Abrahamic religion spread globally through Christianity, being adopted by the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE and Islam by the Islamic from the 7th century CE. Today the Abrahamic religions are one of the major divisions in comparative religions (along with Indian, Iranian, and East Asian religions).

The major Abrahamic religions in chronological order of founding are Judaism in the 7th century BCE, Christianity in the 1st century, and Islam in the 7th century CE. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are the Abrahamic religions with the greatest numbers of adherents.

Abrahamic religions with fewer adherents include the faiths descended from Yazdânism (the Yezidi, Yarsani faiths), Samaritanism, the Druze faith, Bábism, the Bahá'í Faith and Rastafari. As of 2005, estimates classified 54% (3.6 billion people) of the world's population as adherents of an Abrahamic religion, about 32% as adherents of other religions, and 16% as adherents of no organized religion. Christianity claims 33% of the world's population, Islam has 21%, Judaism has 0.2% and the Bahá'í Faith represents around 0.1%.

The unifying characteristic of Abrahamic religions is that all accept the tradition that God revealed himself to the patriarch Abraham. All are monotheistic and conceive God to be a transcendent and the source of moral law. Their religious texts feature many of the same figures, histories, and places, although they often present them with different roles, perspectives, and meanings.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



© Wikipedia

Believers who agree on these similarities and the common Abrahamic origin tend to also be more positive towards other Abrahamic groups. All affirm that the individual (e.g. Adam) is an emanation of God, with, inside, a spark of the *divine*. The individual is the direct connection with God; the group, *de facto* being made by humans has no relevance –or little.

In these four major Abrahamic religions, the individual, God, and the universe are highly separate from each other. The Abrahamic religions believe in a judging, paternal, fully external god to which the individual and nature are subordinate. One seeks salvation or transcendence not by contemplating the natural world or via philosophical speculation, but by seeking to please God (such as obedience with God's wishes or his law) and see divine revelation as outside of self, nature, and custom. All Abrahamic religions claim to be monotheistic, worshiping an exclusive God, although one known by different names. Each of these religions preaches that God creates, is one, rules, reveals, loves, judges, punishes, and forgives.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



An ethical orientation: all these religions speak of a choice between good and evil, which is associated with obedience or disobedience to a single God and to Divine Law. An eschatological world view of history and destiny, beginning with the creation of the world and the concept that God works through history, and ending with a resurrection of the dead and final judgment and world to come.



Abraham, his sons, and captured, enslaved "wives". - © Grace Communion International

Abraham and his tribe were *nomads*, shepherds who were despised by the sedentarized farmers and city dwellers. They were known to live out of rapines, and, when caught, the Abrahamites claimed that (their) God instructed them, protected their kin, and was above the local *human* laws. They had to flee often and their arrogance was well known, and their lawlessness feared. After settling in Palestine, they essentially massacred or enslaved every population they found on their way, and created a Theocracy that survives to these days, and whose politics and policies are eerily similar to the ones of 28 centuries ago. After conquering, colonizing and performing ethnic cleansing, the Hebrews –eventually- settled, built and farmed. The Jewish (or Hebrew, then) population grew rapidly –in part due to hygienic rules- and they did proselytize and convert many other neighboring populations. The major change occurred when the Roman Empire expanded and came into conflict with the secular roles of the Jewish leadership. Eventually the (second) Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE and this destruction signaled the end of sovereignty of the

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



Jews on that part of the world. But the Roman Empire was tolerant and the proportion of the Jewish population in Rome, near the end of the Roman Empire, was estimated at 20%. Many of these converted to Christianity, forming rapidly the first Christian communities that could then easily convert other local groups.

All the Abrahamic religions affirm one eternal God who created the universe, who rules history, who sends prophetic and angelic messengers and who reveals the divine will through inspired revelation. They also affirm that obedience to this creator deity is to be lived out historically and that one day God will unilaterally intervene in human history at the Last Judgment. All Abrahamic religions believe that God guides humanity through revelation to prophets, and each religion recognizes that God revealed teachings up to and including those in their own scripture. Christianity and Islam –as well as other faiths issued from Abrahamic scriptures–acknowledge their source in Judaism. But some still practice fanatical antisemitism, or anti-Christian persecution; more recently, *Islamophobia* has been spreading against the poorest Moslem refugee populations –often using identical rhetoric than the Christians proclaimed (and still do in some countries) against the Jews.

The heritage of Abraham is definitely a violent, bloody, and too often criminal one.

The Individual vs. The Group

The first book of the Bible states early on that: *'God creates men and women in his image and calls on them to take care of the Earth accordingly'* (Gen 1,2728). The teaching of ALL Abrahamic religions is that every single human has a *spark* of a divine essence. And *ONLY* humans.

History describes the consequences on the/our planet. Later, the Christian theologians established differences between humans, based mostly on the color of the skin: most Christians were white; hence the *colored* were *less* humans –even belonging to the class of *apes* or monkeys, allowing for enslavement (well described and prominent in the Bible!). The individuals at the bottom of society, i.e. the poor, the handicapped, the stranger, the *woman* were not the equals of the priest, the lord, the rich, the owner.



In fact –despite sermons and proclamations- there is *no structural social or cultural solidarity* in countries controlled by Abrahamic faiths.

The Group is more than the sum of its individuals

Han Chinese culture embodies a concept of religion that differs from the one that is common in the Abrahamic traditions, which are based on the belief in an omnipotent God who exists outside the world and human race and has complete power over them. Chinese religions, in general, do not place as much emphasis as Christianity does on exclusivity and doctrine. Han Chinese culture is marked by a "*harmonious holism*" in which religious expression is syncretic and religious systems encompass elements that grow, change, and transform but remain within an organic whole. The performance of rites (礼 *lǐ*) is the key characteristic of common Chinese religion, which scholars see as going back to Neolithic times. Rites are conceived as "*what makes the invisible visible*", making possible for humans to cultivate the underlying order of nature. Correctly performed rituals move society in alignment with earthly and heavenly (astral) forces, establishing the harmony of the three realms -Heaven, Earth and humanity. This practice is defined as "*centring*" (央 *yāng* or 中 *zhōng*). Rituals may be performed by government officials, family elders, popular ritual masters and Taoists, the latter cultivating local gods to centre the forces of the universe upon a particular locality. Among all things of creation, humans themselves are "*central*" because they have the ability to cultivate and centre natural forces.

This primordial sense of ritual united the moral and the religious and drew no boundaries between family, social, and political life. From earliest times, the Chinese tended to be all-embracing rather than to treat different religious traditions as separate and independent. The scholar Xinzhong Yao argues that the term "*Chinese religion*", therefore, does not imply that there is only one religious system, but that the "*different ways of believing and practicing... are rooted in and can be defined by culturally common themes and features*", and that "*different religious streams and strands have formed a culturally unitary single tradition*" in which basic concepts and practices are related.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



The continuity of Chinese civilization across thousands of years and thousands of square miles is made possible through China's religious traditions understood as systems of knowledge transmission. A worthy Chinese is supposed to remember a vast amount of information from the past, and to draw on this past to form his moral reasoning. The remembrance of the past and of ancestors is important for individuals and groups. The identities of descent-based groups are molded by stories, written genealogies (*Zupu*, "*books of ancestors*"), temple activities, and village theatre which link them to history.



© lightinchina.org

This reliance on group memory is the foundation of the Chinese practice of ancestor worship (拜祖 *bàizǔ* or 敬祖 *jìngzǔ*) which dates back to prehistory and is the focal aspect of Chinese religion. Defined as "*the essential religion of the Chinese*", ancestor worship is the means of memory and therefore of the cultural vitality of the entire Chinese civilization. Rites, symbols, objects and ideas construct and transmit group and individual identities. Rituals and sacrifices are employed not only to seek blessing from the ancestors, but also to create a communal and educational religious environment in which people are firmly linked with a glorified history. Ancestors are evoked as gods and kept alive in these ceremonies to bring good luck and protect from evil forces and ghosts.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



The two major festivals involving ancestor worship are the Qingming Festival and the Double-Ninth Festival, but veneration of ancestors is held in many other ceremonies, including weddings, funerals, and triad initiations. Worshippers generally offer prayers through a *jingxiang* rite, with offerings of food, light incense and candles, and burning joss paper. These activities are typically conducted at the site of ancestral graves or tombs, at an ancestral temple, or at a household shrine.

A practice developed in the Chinese folk religion of post-Maoist China, that started in the 1990s from the Confucian temples managed by the Kong kin (the lineage of the descendants of Confucius himself), is the representation of ancestors in ancestral shrines no longer just through tablets with their names, but through statues. Statuary effigies were previously exclusively used for Buddhist bodhisattva and Taoist gods.

Lineage cults of the founders surnames and kins are religious microcosms which are part of a larger organism, that is the cults of the ancestor -gods of regional and ethnic groups- which in turn are part of a further macrocosm, the cults of virtuous historical figures that have had an important impact in the history of China, notable examples including Confucius, Guandi or Huangdi, Yandi and Chiyou, the latter three considered ancestor-gods of the Han Chinese (*Huangdi* and *Yandi*) and of western minority ethnicities and foreigners (*Chiyou*). This hierarchy proceeds up to the gods of the cosmos, the Earth and Heaven itself. In other words, ancestors are regarded as the equivalent of Heaven within human society and are therefore the means connecting back to Heaven as the "utmost ancestral father" (曾祖父 *zēngzǔfù*).

There was no term that corresponded to "religion" in Classical Chinese. The combination of *zong* (宗) and *jiao* (教), which now corresponds to "religion", was in circulation since the Tang dynasty in Chan circles to define the Buddhist doctrine. It was chosen to translate the Western concept "religion" only at the end of the 19th century, when Chinese intellectuals adopted the Japanese term *shūkyō* (pronounced *zongjiao* in Chinese). Under the influence of Western rationalism and later Marxism, what most of the Chinese today mean as *zōngjiào* are "organized doctrines", that is "superstructures consisting of superstitions, dogmas, rituals and institutions". Most academics in China use the term "religion" (*zongjiao*) to include formal institutions, specific beliefs, a clergy, and sacred texts, while Western scholars tend to use the term more loosely. *Zōng* (宗 "ancestor", "model", "mode", "master", "pattern", but also "purpose") implies that the understanding of the ultimate derives from the

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



transformed figure of great ancestors or progenitors, who continue to support -and correspondingly rely on- their descendants, in a mutual exchange of benefit. *Jiào* (教 "teaching") is connected to filial piety (*xiao*), as it implies the transmission of knowledge from the elders to the youth and of support from the youth to the elders. Understanding religion primarily as an ancestral tradition, the Chinese have a relationship with the divine that functions socially, politically as well as spiritually. The Chinese concept of "*religion*" draws the divine near to the human world. Because "*religion*" refers to the bond between the human and the divine, there is always a danger that this bond be broken. However, the term *zōngjiào* -instead of separation- emphasizes communication, correspondence and mutuality between the ancestor and the descendant, the master and the disciple, and between the Way (*Dao*, the way of the divine in nature) and its ways. Ancestors are the mediators of Heaven. In other words, to the Chinese, the supreme principle is manifested and embodied by the chief gods of each phenomenon and of each human kin, making the worship of the highest God possible even in each ancestral temple.

Chinese concepts of religion differ from concepts in Judaism and Christianity, says scholar Julia Ching, which were "*religions of the fathers*", that is, patriarchal religions, whereas Chinese religion was not only "*a patriarchal religion but also an ancestral religion*". Israel believed in the "*God of its fathers, but not its divinized fathers*". Among the ancient Chinese, the God of the Zhou dynasty appeared to have been an ancestor of the ruling house. "*The belief in Tian (Heaven) as the great ancestral spirit differed from the Judeo-Christian, and later Islamic belief in a creator God*". Early Christianity's Church Fathers pointed out that the First Commandment injunction, "*thou shalt have no other gods before me*", reserved all worship for one God, and that prayers therefore might not be offered *to* the dead, even though Judaism, Christianity, and Islam did encourage prayers *for* the dead. Unlike the Abrahamic traditions in which living beings are created by God out of nothing, in Chinese religions all living beings descend from beings that existed before. These ancestors are the roots of current and future beings. They continue to live in the lineage which they begot and are cultivated as models and exemplars by their descendants.

The mutual support of elders and youth is needed for the continuity of the ancestral tradition, that is communicated from generation to generation. With an understanding of religion as teaching and education, the Chinese have a staunch

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



confidence in the human capacity of transformation and perfection, enlightenment or immortality. In the Chinese religions, humans are confirmed and reconfirmed with the ability to improve themselves, in a positive attitude towards eternity. Hans Küng defined Chinese religions as the "religions of wisdom", thereby distinguishing them from the "religions of prophecy" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and from the "religions of mysticism" (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism).

The cults of gods and ancestors that in recent (originally Western) literature have been classified as "*Chinese popular religion*", traditionally neither have a common name nor are considered *zōngjiào* ("doctrines"). The lack of an overarching name conceptualizing Chinese local and indigenous cults has led to some confusion in the terminology employed in scholarly literature. In Chinese, with the terms usually translated in English as "*folk religion*" (i.e. 民間宗教 *mínjiān zōngjiào*) or "*folk faith*" (i.e. 民間信仰 *mínjiān xìnyǎng*) they generally refer to the folk religious movements of salvation, and not to the local and indigenous cults of gods and ancestors. To resolve this issue, some Chinese intellectuals have proposed to formally adopt "*Chinese native religion*" or "*Chinese indigenous religion*" (i.e. 民俗宗教 *mínsú zōngjiào*), or "*Chinese ethnic religion*" (i.e. 民族宗教 *mínzú zōngjiào*), or even "*Chinese religion*" (中華教 *Zhōnghuájìào*) and "*Shenxianism*" (神仙教 *Shénxiānjiào*), as single names for the local indigenous cults of China.

This family-oriented, essentially non-religious (*prophecy* or *mysticism*) Chinese tradition is much more open; its tolerant series of cults, celebrations, ceremonies keep the community closer but is not imposed on most. There is no ***sin***, no ***damnation***, no ***salvation***, no ***ostracism***, and no real ***clergy*** with power of plunder and condemnation to the pyre, lapidating, gallows or galleys for the "*heretics*".

The recent news on John Allen Chau, killed on North Sentinel Island while trying to convert the Sentinelese to Christianity, is foreign to the mentality, culture, or concepts of Chinese. The devastating genocide in Yemen, due to war between Sunni and Shia Moslems –with massive support of the USA, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates vs. Iran- is a strong warning against clerical Muslim fanaticism in Western Xinjiang, or the activities of the United States Seventh Fleet in the South China sea (with a strong influence of the Evangelical Christians, very present among the high-ranking US brass).

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



These and the daily Twitter rants of Donald Trump and his administration are abhorrent to the highly-educated professionals who conduct negotiations and diplomacy for China, Japan or South Korea.



Chinese philosophy has long known that mental health is communal - Detail from the “*The Hundred Sons*,” ink on handscroll, by an unidentified artist. - © The Metropolitan Museum, New York

In the March 17, 2021 issue of *Psyche* (Aeon.co), Lexus McLeodis, associate professor of Philosophy and Asian/American studies at the University of Connecticut publishes an interesting essay titled: “*Chinese philosophy has long known that mental state is communal.*” I have slightly edited his text into the version below:

In Western Countries -and those influenced by the Western European history, colonialism or religions- **mental illness** is often thought to be a matter of individual disorder. Modern psychiatry looks to features of individual experience, behaviour and thoughts to diagnose mental illness, and focuses on individual remedies to treat it. If you are depressed, this is understood as *your* response to circumstances, based on features of your genetics, disordered patterns of thinking, or personal problems and emotional states. Western treatment of mental illness follows these same individualistic lines. The individual is provided with medicine and therapy, which are certainly helpful. But such an emphasis on

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



the individual can lead us to neglect communal approaches to treatment. Often overlooked are the ways in which social norms, cultural beliefs and communal attitudes contribute to mental illness.

Ancient Chinese scholars understood this well. These thinkers recognized a number of mental and behavioral disorders as illnesses (*bing*), which were categorized and discussed in the earliest-known medical text in China, the *Huangdi Neijing Lingshu Jing* (the oldest parts of which date to the 4th century BCE). This text describes a number of mental illnesses, most prominently *dian*, marked by ‘*unhappiness, headache, red eyes and a troubled mind*’, and *kuang*, marked by ‘*manic forgetfulness, flying into rages*’ and ‘*wild activity*’, among other symptoms. Early Chinese medical scholars understood such mental illnesses to have a number of contributing causes, including overabundance of emotion, failure to control desires, the depletion of ‘*vital energy*’ from the organs – and the community to which one belongs.

Mental illness is linked to emotion in a number of early philosophical and medical texts. A passage from the *Guanzi* instructs that harmonious and effective action is possible only in the absence of the kinds of extreme joy, pleasure and anger that can disorder the mind, leading it to ‘*lose its (original) form*’. The *Zhongyong* associates harmony (*he*) with the proper restriction of the emotions. A passage in the *Huangdi Neijing* reads: ‘*When anger abounds and does not end, then it will harm the mind.*’ Just as in the case of tools or machines, there are ways in which we can use our bodies that overtax or harm them, and thus cause injury and illness (including mental illness), according to ancient Chinese scholars. This is an astute insight into the nature of illness.

Today, we recognize the importance of communities and situations in *some* instances related to illness, but still hesitate to attribute illness to communal causes. The American Psychiatric Association (in the latest edition of its handbook, the *DSM-5*), for example, recognizes the reality of situational mental illness, as well as illness in part caused by social and developmental factors. We recognize that overwork can lead to burnout, for example, and that traumatic events can lead to illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder and other conditions that the *DSM* categorizes as ‘*trauma and stressor-related disorders*.’ Still, might communities and their features be more central to causing mental

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



illness than we think?

According to ancient Chinese scholars, we can avoid illnesses caused by overabundant emotion (or treat them) by learning to restrain the mind. *'Let the mind have no anger,'* instructs a passage from the *Huangdi Neijing*. However, achieving this requires more than just individualized approaches aimed at restructuring the way that ill individuals think about their experience. As helpful as treatments such as psychiatric medication or cognitive behavioral therapy are, they don't address all the underlying issues that lead to mental illness. Features of the communities and cultures of which one is a member have great influence on the formation and expression of our emotions. It would be wrong to see anger, for example, as a universally natural response to certain events, independent of culture. Members of certain communities will be more likely to display or feel anger in given situations than members of other communities with different cultural norms governing emotion. The ways in which we evaluate and even experience emotions are influenced by elements of culture. In an interview in 2018, the Dutch cultural psychologist Batja Mesquita said: *"Many cultures don't think about their emotions as something that lives inside of an individual, but more as something between people. In those cultures, emotions are what people do together, with each other. So, when I'm angry, that is something that lives between you and me."*

Mental illness is often due to a combination of genetic predisposition and situational features. What calls for anxiety, anger, joy or other responses will almost always be in large part dependent on communal norms, of the kind integrated into the expectations and behavioral tendencies of individuals from a young age, through interaction with the community. This is why, for example, certain unfilial actions or disrespect of a parent or elder will cause enormous shame in certain East Asian cultures, but not in many Western cultures. Cultural factors also make certain groups, such as Asian Americans for example, less likely to seek psychiatric healthcare than other ethnic groups in the US.

None of this would have been news to Chinese scholars such as the early Confucians, who recognized that the behaviors and attitudes of individuals are not due solely to individual character and decisions. This is the reason why Confucius taught that, *'if you wish to become virtuous, you must be careful whom*

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



you are around. He advised that *'we should take as friends only those who are at least as morally good as we are.'* Being part of harmonious and virtuous communities is necessary for the development of healthy behaviours, attitudes and emotions. If we are in bad, vicious or unhealthy communities, our beliefs, emotions, expectations and attitudes (among other things) will be disordered in critical ways.

This is relevant when it comes to mental illness, because such illness is at least in part a matter of behavioral and emotional norms governed by society. Confucians would likely have said of our own modern world that the alienation created by the self-centeredness required for modern economic and consumer culture plays a major role in driving mental illness. Tu Weiming, a contemporary scholar of Confucianism, writes that, according to the Confucian view, *'self-centeredness easily leads to a closed world ... to a state of paralysis'*. The kinds of community that promote self-centeredness and self-concern – ranging from the seemingly innocuous concern with *'defining oneself'*, via various individual and consumer choices, to the corrosive lack of empathy or care for others in the community – are communities likely to inculcate in individual members behavioral and attitudinal traits that contribute to mental illness.

As we try to address the widespread and seemingly increasing problem of mental illness in our modern world – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 50 per cent of the US population will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder within their lifetime, and that as many as 4 per cent of the population live with serious mental illness – we should take heed of the Confucian view. There is evidence that mental illness is increasing in younger members of society, along with increases in suicide and attempted suicide. Such increases in mental illness might say less about individual traits than they do about certain alienating and corrosive features of our society. As Confucius himself said: *'The faults of an individual are in each case attributable to their group.'* While many efforts, including providing greater access to professional mental health treatment, should be part of our response to the problem of mental illness, we should also carefully and seriously consider which aspects of our shared cultures might be contributing to the rise of mental illness. A healthy community is also a thriving community.



Sedimentation: The Existentialist Challenge



Frantz Fanon - © Photo by photographymontreal

Is there any point thinking about what to do? It is often said that our judgments and behaviour are really caused by immediate intuitions and gut feelings, with reasoning happening only afterwards. But that claim misses an important point. Experiments also indicate that reasoning shapes the cognitive system that produces future responses. The more we reason that something is good or bad, right or wrong, attractive or unattractive, the more influential that attitude becomes over our intuitions and gut feelings. Aristotle would not be surprised. His ethics rests on his idea that character develops in precisely this way. Aristotle's view, however, does not explain how your thought and behaviour can be influenced by social stereotypes that you do not endorse in your own reasoning. We can understand this process better if we turn to the idea of sedimentation developed by three French philosophers in the middle of the 20th century.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



Maurice Merleau-Ponty coined the term ‘*sedimentation*’ in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). He uses it to describe the process of taking on information about our bodies and environment in a form that enables us to act intelligently without much attention, effort or thought. Just as a river accumulates particles and deposits them as sedimented structures that direct the river’s flow, argued Merleau Ponty, so we accumulate information as we go about our lives, which gradually and unconsciously builds into a contoured bedrock of understanding that guides our behavior. Merleau-Ponty’s work helps us to see how our behavior can be influenced by stereotypes that we do not agree with. For if this sedimentation process is insensitive to whether we are interacting with the world itself or with media representations of it, then stereotypes occurring regularly in our media will become integrated into our worldview along with knowledge of the real world. Because he focused on knowledge, Merleau-Ponty did not develop a theory of the sedimentation of goals and motivations. He did suggest that these might become sedimented in a similar way to knowledge, but he did not explore the idea in detail.

For a unified account of how our behavior can be effortlessly influenced by our own repeatedly endorsed motivations and by social stereotypes that we do not endorse, we can turn to the existentialist writings of Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon. De Beauvoir articulates her version of sedimentation most fully in *The Second Sex* (1949). Her focus is on how we develop our goals and values. Girls and boys are raised with different expectations and inducements, and so are continually encouraged to think and act in ways that fit their assigned gender. Girls are required to respond to their environments in pleasing and helpful ways, whereas boys are encouraged to explore and dominate theirs. These expectations shape the goals and values that we pursue across childhood and adolescence. De Beauvoir argued that this repeated endorsement of the same goals and values embeds them into our cognitive systems through sedimentation. Because girls and boys are subject to different expectations, we develop gendered sets of goals and values. De Beauvoir argued that the same process also embeds gender stereotypes into our outlooks. As our goals and values become sedimented through repetition, so too do our strategies for achieving them. These strategies encode information that helps us navigate our world. And this information includes the gender stereotypes that people are expected to live up to.

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



So, gender stereotypes themselves become sedimented in our minds along with the goals and values that make our behaviour conform, more or less, to those stereotypes. It is because the stereotypes have themselves become embedded, argued de Beauvoir, that they are perpetuated in the ways we raise the next generation. And for the same reason, it is difficult to avoid sometimes manifesting these stereotypes in thought and action, even when we explicitly reject them. Fanon presented a similar account of the origins of racial identity in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). He described the stories and films common to childhoods across France and the French colonies in the first half of the 20th century, including in his own upbringing in Martinique. These tended to show Europeans as heroic and sophisticated. By contrast, when Africans were presented at all, they were shown as inferior and dangerous.

All children in France and the French colonies, regardless of skin color, were explicitly taught in school to consider themselves French and therefore as European. They were taught about European history and literature. They were encouraged to develop goals and values consonant with this European identity. Fanon argued that the combination of this with the imagery in stories and films inculcated an idea of European superiority and African inferiority in everyone brought up this way. It is no coincidence that de Beauvoir, Fanon and Merleau-Ponty all developed versions of the idea of sedimentation. De Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty had been friends since they were students together, and developed their varieties of sedimentation in continuous discussion over 15 years. Fanon developed his while studying at the University of Lyon, where he attended Merleau-Ponty's lectures.

The version of sedimentation that de Beauvoir and Fanon argued for is specifically existentialist. It is our chosen motivations, along with strategies and information for acting on them, that become sedimented. But our sedimented ideas and goals are not the only influences on our thought. By considering other people's ideas or taking up a critical perspective on our own ideas, we can formulate conclusions at odds with our sedimented outlook. This explains why inattentive aspects of our behaviour can manifest sedimented stereotypes that we do not endorse. But it also indicates how we can take control of the intuitions and feelings that drive these aspects of our behavior. If the existentialism of de Beauvoir and Fanon is right, we are not the puppets of inherited ideologies. We can reason about the attitudes that matter most

EAST IS EAST AND WEST IS WEST



to us, and we can reform our social environments. In both ways, we can actively reshape the sedimented outlook that guides our behavior.

This digression towards one of my mentors in 1953-55 (when I attended with thirst and avidity his seminars at the Collège de France) is to show that *some* Western thinkers could look outside the box. Otherwise, indeed, *Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet*. At least until a new American administration takes over, and the Western people learn in depth about China's culture, language(s), peoples, past and present, and how we can all, together make the world a better place for our children and their offsprings.



Acknowledgements

Much thanks to my sources (see below in References) and to Yves P. Huin for skilled editing, reviewing and formatting.

References

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ballad_of_East_and_West
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudyard_Kipling
- <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/07/a-preview-of-your-chinese-future/>
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/12/elegy-democratic-hong-kongdistinct-mainland-china/577570/>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anarchism>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abrahamic_religions
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_China
- <https://psyche.co/ideas/chinese-philosophy-has-long-known-that-mental-health-is-communal?>
- https://aeon.co/ideas/sedimentation-the-existentialist-challenge-to-stereotypes?utm_source=Aeon+Newsletter&utm_campaign=e05c480652-