

What's the Matter with Saying 'The Orient'?

by Christopher Hill , March 17, 2009

Over the last twenty years most foreign scholars of Japanese history and society have stopped using phrases such as "the Orient," "the Far East," and "the East" in their classes and writing. Phrases like these have also largely disappeared from political discourse: it would be unusual, these days, to hear a diplomat talk about a country's "Far Eastern alliances" or a trade negotiator refer to "economic relations with the Orient." Nonetheless, it is still common to encounter these phrases in daily life. A restaurant may say that its cooking has "a touch of the Orient"; a bookstore may have a section called Eastern philosophy. When I conduct teacher workshops participants will occasionally say that they want to help their students understand the Far East. Many whose careers are devoted to teaching about East Asia share the goal, but would resist describing it that way. So what is the problem with calling East Asia "the Orient"? There are several reasons scholars now avoiding using phrases like "the East," "the Far East," and "the Orient," including the exoticism they convey, their association with modern empires, the skewed view of world geography they present, and their tendency to homogenize large, diverse parts of the world as if they shared a single cultural identity. In place of these "big" phrases I would suggest the simple solution of being specific: If one means Japan, say so; if one means East Asia, use that phrase. They may not sound as grand, but they probably convey what one means better.

In American English, "the Far East" and "the Orient" often conjure up images of the China trade—tea, silk, and porcelain carried across the world by clipper ships—or perhaps of a Zen sage dispensing wisdom in a mountain temple. Whether it is the intention of the speaker or not, these phrases tend to exoticize what they are attached to. (Even if one uses a phrase with such strong associations carefully, one cannot control how others understand it.) In some cases exoticism may be the main attraction of the terms themselves. Certainly some travel-guide publishers and makers of herbal tea are happy to turn a dollar by dealing in images of a mysterious East. The idea of great distance—the *Far East*—compounds the sense of fascination: things must be really different so far away. A quick glance around popular culture shows that this kind of exoticism allows "the East" and "the Orient" to accommodate all sorts of contradictory meanings. "The Orient" can suggest deep spirituality (Japan the land of monks), cunning ruthlessness (Japan the economic conqueror), a martial ethic (Japan the land of modern samurai), a place where the human merges with technology (Japan the land of cyborgs), and so on. Behind the contradictory meanings is an assumption that there is some unifying principle, some essence, that makes "the East" what it is—and if one could only grasp that principle, one could understand the place and its people. Popular books that promise to explain East Asia or one of its countries by revealing its secret principles are fairly common.

The habit of explaining distant places in terms of a cultural essence was a common feature of European empires from the eighteenth to mid twentieth century. The association of phrases such as "the East" and "the Orient" with modern imperialism is one reason that some people find them offensive and others avoid them. Critics of "Orientalism" such as Edward Said have traced the close connections between scholarly writing about "the Orient" and the administration of European empires in the Middle East and Asia.¹ Colonial administrators took scholars' analyses of "Oriental society" and the "Oriental mind" as guides for managing colonized peoples. Sometimes the connection between administration and scholarship was even more direct: some colonial administrators such as Sir William "India" Jones were well regarded scholars themselves. Pronouncements about "the East" thus were closely associated with the history of European imperialism. The historical association of phrases like "the Orient" and "the Far East" with geopolitics can also be found in North America and even East Asia itself. Ruth Benedict wrote her famous analysis of Japanese society, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, to aid the United States' war against Japan in the 1940s. (At the time Benedict had never been to Japan.) Around the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, Stefan Tanaka and Kang Sangjung have argued, scholars in Japan applied the pejorative term "the Orient" (*Tōyō*) to other East Asian countries to justify Japan's colonization of the region, on the grounds that rule by "civilized" Japan would benefit the backward parts of Asia.² The association of phrases such as "the Orient" and "the East" with empires, contemporary scholars like Said and Tanaka would say, is so close that it is impossible to use them to simply mean a geographical area.

Even if one does not accept the argument that these phrases are politically loaded, there are practical reasons for avoiding them. One is the skewed view of world geography that a phrase like "the Far East" creates. Far from what? From Europe, of course—if Europe is the point from which all distances are

measured. (Why someone would say that Japan is far east of California is harder to explain.) Historically, however, China was the economic, political, and cultural center of East Asia, as the self-aggrandizing name "Middle Kingdom" (*zhongguo, chūgoku*) indicates. For many centuries, Europe was a scarcely known place of little importance to people living in East Asia. It is hard to imagine that people in the region thought of themselves as "far" from there—and the idea really is as odd now as it was in the past. Whether one argues, as Thomas Friedman does, that the world is now economically "flat," or follows the view of economic historians such as Andre Gunder Frank that East and South Asia were the center of the world economy for most of history, and soon will be again, describing East Asia as "far" does little to explain its place in the world.

Simply because of their vagueness, "the Orient," "the East," and "the Far East" hinder one's understanding of the world in other ways. In Europe, "the Orient" classically began at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. Yet do Lebanon and Korea have that much in common? Perhaps they do (both places have experienced domination by more powerful neighbors), but lumping them together as "the East" does not help one understand *how* they do. A phrase like "the East" evokes a vast geographic area, without quite saying where it begins and ends, and implies that the whole swath is homogeneous. That is precisely why it is so easy to make sweeping statements about "the Orient," "the Far East," and so forth. But the more sweeping the statement the less one actually learns from it: using these umbrella terms makes it harder, not easier, to understand the world. From this point of view it may help to consider that many generalizations about "the East" convey an opposite generalization about "the West," typically taken to mean Western and Central Europe and North America. The commonly heard contrast between "Eastern spirituality" and "Western rationality" is one example. But no part of the world is so simple. In this case, neither generalization can really stand on its own; rather, they support each other. By describing Japan or another East Asian country as "Oriental," one risks becoming entangled in a whole series of ambiguous ideas about the societies of the world.

The exoticism of phrases like "the East" and "the Orient," their loaded politics, the odd geography they create, the way they homogenize—each of these are reasons to resist using them. So what should one do? As I suggested earlier, the simplest response may be the best: be specific. "Japan" and "East Asia" are not absolutely neutral names (each has a history), but they escape many of the stereotypes associated with a name like "the Orient" and "the Far East." Be specific, too, about what countries have in common—and how they differ. China, Japan, and the kingdoms of Korean peninsula share a history of Confucianism, which had a deep impact on governmental institutions across the region (and in Vietnam, typically considered part of Southeast Asia). Their responses to the penetration of East Asia by European explorers and missionaries beginning in the sixteenth century, however, were quite different. So too were the histories of religion in the countries of the region, where an enormous range of beliefs flourished, including Buddhism, Daoism, popular millenarian movements such as the Taiping Rebellion in China and "syncretic" blendings of Buddhism and Shintō in Japan. Keeping in mind the varied history of the region makes it easy to avoid suggesting that some ineffable essence, some unseen principle, unites Asia. Societies in East Asia indeed differ in many ways from societies elsewhere in the world—including Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, in addition to Europe and North America—but one can build a richer understanding of such differences by setting aside misleading phrases like "the Orient," "the East," and "the Far East."

Notes

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

² Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Kang Sangjung, "In Range of the Critique of Orientalism," *Deconstructing Nationality*, ed. Naoki Sakai, Brett de Bary, and Iyotani Toshio (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2005).

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