

EAST ASIA

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Cresques Abraham (1325–1387), *Caravan on the Silk Road*

IN THIS ISSUE WE WILL LOOK AT SOME of the ways in which the West has been influenced by the East—specifically, for our purposes, by the countries of eastern Asia. Our story begins during China’s Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Founded by Liu Bang (Emperor Gaozu) and considered to have been a golden age in Chinese history, this four-hundred-year-long period was marked by the rise of Confucianism, the invention of lasting technological advancements, and economic prosperity. Also, the highly consequential [Silk Road](#), not named such until 1877, came into prominence in this era due to the expansionist policies of Emperor Wu. Early in his reign, Wu was eager to establish military alliances with the people of Central Asia with hopes that they might support China’s efforts to fend off the people of

Xiongnu, a confederation of nomadic tribes that dominated the area we today call Mongolia. In 139 BCE, Wu sent his envoy Zhang Qian to explore possibilities for such support, and one byproduct of the trip was the valuable information he brought back to China that led to increased trade with people all along the route he had traveled. Ultimately, this route expanded into what is today known as the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was a large network of routes connecting trading posts and markets extending from the Greco-Roman metropolis of Antioch; across the Syrian Desert; eastward through what are today Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan; and then into Mongolia and China. Over time, routes extended to ports on the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, places from which goods were shipped to



cities throughout the Roman Empire and Europe. Maritime routes were also added to this complex system, connecting southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula, eastern Africa, and Europe.

Although the name “Silk Road” derives from the popularity of Chinese silk among tradesmen in the Roman Empire and elsewhere in Europe, silk was not the only significant export from the East to the West. Other popular items were porcelain, tea, and spices. Also in demand were paper and gunpowder, both of which were invented by the Chinese during the Han Dynasty, and both had obvious and lasting impacts on culture and history in the West. Paper arrived in Europe around 800, and the eventual development of Gutenberg’s printing press, around 1400, led to mass production of books, pamphlets,

and newspapers, which enabled an unprecedented exchange of news and information. As for gunpowder, England and France, around 1300, developed a way to refine it for use in cannons, giving those with access to gunpowder obvious advantages in battle and dramatically impacting the political history of Europe.

East Asian influence on the West in terms of material objects is significant, as is the influence of culture. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Japanese art, in particular, profoundly changed Western art and helped to usher in Impressionism, a step away from realism—portraying fleeting moments, a sense of motion, and changes in the quality of light throughout the day. Western approaches to spirituality were influenced by the philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, which

In this 18th-century painting, individuals representing Japan, China, and the West (probably Holland) are gathered at a table. On the right, the individual representing the West is a man of science; he is holding a book on anatomy open to an illustration of a male skeleton. On the left, China is represented by a Confucian scholar shown with a scroll of his writings, a ruyi scepter, and what might be medicinal herbs in a Chinese vase. The Japanese man holds a fan and a white snake encircles his wrist. This grouping of three worthies is a variation on popular illustrations of the unity of the three creeds showing the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius or, in some cases, Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Jesus.

Above them is a scene in which fire brigades of the three countries attempt to extinguish the fire consuming a multi-storied pagoda. Each group approaches the problem in a different way. Japan’s approach is presented as hefty sumo wrestlers viewing the action from afar and using the water for personal hygiene. The Chinese are throwing water on the fire using small buckets. The Westerners are using a modern pump and hose. Three different approaches to a difficult problem.

focused more on ethical living and an experiential path toward personal enlightenment and less on faith-based dogma centered on a supreme being. The Western approach to healing and wellness has been influenced by such practices as acupuncture, herbal medicine, tai chi, feng shui, and yoga. And dietary practices have seen the integration of spices and soy products, a reduction in meat-eating with a focus on plant-based foods, and surely the recent popularity of sushi and ramen.



Shiba Kōkan (1747–1818), *A Meeting of Japan, China, and the West*



The previous paragraphs barely begin to describe the countless ways that the West has been influenced by the East. Yet even this brief introduction makes it clear that those of us in the West, over a span of centuries, have had our lives deeply enriched by the immense variety of material goods as well as belief systems and values that originated in the East.

One concept that has become familiar as a result of exposure to Eastern philosophy or spirituality is nondualism—**“the complete absence of separation (duality) between you and the world you observe.”** (Sas)

“Nondualism means ‘not two,’ and that is a way of saying that the automatic way we perceive the world, to be a collection of elements that are entirely distinct and separate from each other, is not the actual true nature of things.” (Klein)



Winslow Homer, *International Tea Party*, c. 1867

Given its preference for wholeness over separation, nondualism rejects thinking in binary opposites such as good/bad, black/white, hero/villain, male/female, and, yes, East/West. Deep understanding and compassion begin with being able to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously, appreciating life’s circumstances on a continuum, developing a fluid way of seeing that allows for complexity and uncertainty.

Centering on nondualism is a transformative experience, considered to be a key to Enlightenment, freedom from the samsaric cycle of rebirth, and the ultimate liberation from suffering.

“As the illusion of the separate ego falls away, its petty worries and ambitions, its bickering likes and dislikes, its fears and unfulfilled desires—all these obstacles to peace of mind fall away as well. And what remains is just peace of mind, a tranquil bliss, and a deep feeling of loving unity with everything and everyone.” (Sas)

And this leads us back to the very beginning. We speak of East and West as if they are as different as night and day, black and white. Inazō Nitobe, in the chapter “Can East and West Ever Meet?,” addresses this notion:

“Every attempt made to discriminate between the East and the West in their fundamental traits has failed...It is true that one can easily and superficially find marks of distinction; but they are never so peculiar to the one that they are not found in the other. Even in the religious faiths of Europe and Asia, which have for centuries been accepted as two poles of thought, modern studies discover mutual influences and remarkable similarities.” (Nitobe)

Nitobe continues:

“I wish to plead for a fuller recognition of the global character of the moral world—with a single centre which gives it its shape and a single axis on which it revolves. It is too easy to forget the unity of mankind in the clamour of national ambition, and to widen the gap between East and West in the struggle for political domination; but in the higher region of spiritual forces and religious thoughts, of fine arts and scientific research, the cause of humanity and the need of mutual understanding between the opposite quarters of the

compass may well find a sympathetic hearing...until the West and the East come to know each other better and join forces for a common end, Mankind will not enter the new Kingdom.” (Nitobe)

Indeed, if there is a value that undergirds trade, travel, and exploration, it is to be open to knowing humankind in a deeper and richer way, learning about and appreciating the whole of humankind. 🌸



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