THE DANCE OF EAST AND WEST: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN UNSTABLE BUT ENDURING CONCEPTUAL PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between East and West is among the most prominent and influential cross-cultural tropes in both academic scholarship and public discourse. However, in most cases, this attention tends to focus narrowly on certain instances or iterations of this binary. In particular, Edward Said's influential analysis of 'Orientalism' has led to a relative fixation on the dynamic between Western Europe and the 'near' and 'far' East in the 19th century. However, the East-West polarity has been a defining feature of at least the last 2,500 years of human history. It is, moreover, a complex and contested binary, whose boundaries and contours have constantly shifted. This paper therefore highlights these complexities through a 'psycho-historical' approach, namely, exploring the psychological nature and dynamics of this distinction through a *historical* lens. Thus, we explore variations on the East-West theme throughout six key historical eras: pre-history; the Classical Age; the rise of Christianity; the medieval world; the Enlightenment; and the Cold War. It is hoped that our analysis not only offers a useful introduction to the evolution of the East-West distinction but also encourages scholars to adopt a more subtle and nuanced approach to its dynamics.

Keywords: East, West, cross-cultural, history, orientalism.

INTRODUCTION

A wealth of research has indicated that human societies throughout history appear to have been invariably characterised by (at least) three interlinked tendencies: (1) the creation of in-groups (e.g., one's tribe) and out-groups (e.g., other tribes) (De Dreu et al., 2016); (2) the formation of positive beliefs and attitudes regarding one's in-group (e.g., loyalty, familiarity, and high regard) versus negative beliefs and attitudes regarding out-groups (e.g., antipathy, suspicion, and low regard) (Shaw & Wong, 1987); and (3) an understanding of in-group versus out-group dynamics through the lens of spatial orientation (e.g., North vs South) (Grigoryev, 2022). This paper charts the evolving history of a particularly influential form of spatial comparison: the distinction between West versus East (WvE). This binary has found myriad forms of expression throughout the centuries, with fuzzy and disputed boundaries that are ever shifting in response to historical events. Moreover, it has maintained its rhetorical force to this day, serving as a powerful conceptual lens of analysis and comparison in numerous fields of endeavour, from politics to the academy. Indeed, appeals to WvE differences are frequently invoked today even within disciplines such as psychology, in which cross-cultural nuances are often overlooked in favour of a more universalising perspective.

Indeed, one crucial element in contemporary global political economy is the deep integration of China into the US-led international liberal order. From this perspective, the rhetoric of political rivalry emphasised in US National Security Strategy – as much as the small-scale trade wars caused by the US can be seen as an indication of assimilation problems on the part of

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the Hegemon instead of what has been feared, the onset of Age of Empires, Global Game of Thrones, or the return of the state of nature (Barbieri, 2020; Hopewell, 2021; Juutinen & Käkönen, 2016). However, the continuity of sui generis liberal world order would involve tremendous regional changes. This is related to the American foreign policy agenda discussion towards the "deep engagement" strategy to balance or counter the Rising Powers' initiative.

However, many contemporary invocations of WvE are often flawed or at least partial and limited in some way. This is frequently because they focus on only one particular iteration of WvE dynamics (hence being partial/limited), such as Western Europe compared to the 'Far East' of East Asia in the 19th century, and take this as representative of WvE dynamics more generally. In that respect, Said's (1979) identification and articulation of 'Orientalism' has been hugely influential. This was his label for the process by which 19th-century Western thinkers came to understand themselves and their society by contrasting it with the 'Other' of the Orient. There were different strains of this thought process. More benevolent, albeit still contentious, were forms of 'Romantic Orientalism', in which the East was viewed through a utopian lens as superior in various ways, such as wiser, less materialistic, and more spiritual (Taylor, 2004). Then, far more troubling were the discourses used to justify and rationalise imperialism and colonialism, for instance presenting the East as inefficient and thus apparently 'in need' of intervention. Despite Said's real and important insights though, such is his influence that his particular iteration of WvE dynamics has tended to overshadow all others, often becoming the main or even only historical WvE distinction acknowledged or cited by most scholars. This of course is not a criticism of Said per se, nor of those who have drawn on his work; indeed, it is rather a sign of how original, compelling, and impactful his ideas have been. However, this dominance of the subsequent literature has had some negative consequences, including that his particular iteration has since often been reified and essentialised in subsequent discourse in the form of stable generalisations and stereotypes. Thus, for instance, the West has often been interpreted as self-consciously individualistic, which is then juxtaposed with a view of the East as more communal and – if seen in a negative light – conspicuously *lacking* in individuality (Martinez Mateo et al., 2013). This point of comparison has then arguably provided the foundation for what is perhaps the most common WvE distinction in modern scholarship – certainly in fields such as psychology (Lomas et al., 2022) – namely the idea that the West tends towards individualism and the East towards collectivism, as influentially articulated by Hofstede (1980) and Markus and Kitayama (1991).

However, as this paper will show, the WvE distinction has seen many incarnations over the centuries, together with complex, shifting arrays of thought and behaviour patterns. Indeed, East and West are relative terms (e.g., who/what is West for one group of people may be East for another), which contributes to the shifting meanings. Indeed, as Emmerson (1984) illustrates using the case of 'Southeast Asia', such words have a powerful function in that they 'simultaneously describe and invent reality' (p. 1); while some names acknowledge what exists (e.g., 'rose') and others create what would otherwise not exist (e.g., 'unicorn'), the terms East and West effectively play *both* roles. As such, we hope that our analysis will not only offer a useful introduction to the evolution of the WvE binary but also encourage scholars to adopt a more nuanced and subtle approach to the distinction. Thus, we have sought to provide what one might call a 'psycho-historical' account of this binary, that is, an account that lies at the intersection of psychology and history. We are interested in the psychological nature and the dynamics of this distinction, specifically interrogated through a *historical* lens. This approach heeds calls from Muthukrishna et al. (2020) to envisage psychology as a 'historical science', namely to consider how the phenomena it focuses on have changed in meaningful ways over the centuries. Here, we use this temporal perspective to shed light on East-West dynamics specifically, but it bears emphasising that this approach can help illuminate myriad and indeed perhaps all aspects of human psychology and culture more broadly. To that point, their foundational paper provides a wealth of 'illustrative examples that link contemporary psychological variation—including cooperation, trust, personality, and gender differences—to historical processes focused on religion, kinship, formal institutions (democracy), economic patterns, and ecological factors' (p.721).

In terms of East-West considerations in particular, the historical terrain here is so vast that we cannot hope to be exhaustive. Rather, our goal will be limited to briefly surveying just six epochs – and moreover often focusing on an especially pivotal year – to show the shifting nature of WvE through the centuries. These are: (1) the 'pre-history' before the WvE comparison emerged; (2) the classical era; (3); the rise of Christianity; (4) the medieval world; (5) the European Enlightenment; and

(6) the Cold War. In each case, we highlight the internally complex and ever-shifting contours of the WvE binary and show how the legacies of each period's WvE relations continue to shape the present. As a final point, it might perhaps be deduced from this choice of epochs that we authors are ourselves Western and have an intrinsically Western 'take' on the topic, with an implicit privileging of Western empirics as evidence. Indeed, even more idiosyncratically, the selection of these eras and our interpretation of them represent our own personal interests and areas of expertise (although all the instances chosen are undeniably important and may well be selected by other scholars in similar papers). This we acknowledge as a limitation, though we would also argue that there is no neutral 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1986); any account inevitably bears the cultural and biographical imprint of its authors' particular background. Thus, it would be most welcome if our paper were to be augmented in the future by similar analyses of these WvE dynamics from other perspectives, including of course from scholars in the East as well as from relevant cultures that are less easily categorised. Indeed, we hope our paper can inspire and encourage such efforts and that collectively these works can approach a relatively full and comprehensive account of this topic.

PRE-HISTORY

The WvE dichotomy may have emerged in an enduring and substantial sense in relation to the wars between the ancient Greeks and the Persians around the 5th century BCE, as we explore in our second main section. However, notions of West and East were developed well before that time, with roots in 'pre-history' (i.e., the vast epoch before written records were kept or are now lost) (Lomas & Case, 2023). Of course, this lack of records makes tracing these roots difficult, but not impossible. There are two main sources of suggestive evidence pointing to the use of West and East in pre-history: linguistic and cartographic. Here, we shall briefly explore each in turn. First, though, we should observe that although the concepts of WvE existed in pre-history, these appear to mainly function as spatial directions, together with the associated symbolism. There, the kind of group-based spatial *identification* that began to emerge in the Classical era, whereby people conceptualised themselves or others as *being* Western or Eastern, seems not to have been present. Rather, all peoples appeared to gravitate towards a centre-periphery distinction, whereby their own in-group was at the centre of their conceptualisation of the world, with out-groups, to the extent that people were aware of such, relegated to the periphery (Delnero, 2017).

Our earliest traces of notions of WvE are found in language, with the etymologies of these concepts, whose genesis may stretch back far into the unrecorded mists of pre-history, revealing clues about their emergent conceptualisations. In short, across many languages, they are associated with the passage of the sun, with words for East and West linked to sunrise and sunset, respectively. These words themselves stem from the Proto-Indo-European roots *aus* and *wes*, which refer to an upward versus a downward movement and hence also to the rising or setting sun and likewise to dawn and dusk (Vasunia, 2012; Gąsiorowski, 2012). Similar patterns are found cross-culturally. With the East, the Proto-Indo-European root *aus* is also reflected in languages such as Akkadian (*asu*), Dutch (*oost*), Frisian (*ast*), German (*Ost*), Greek (*ēōs*), Latin (*aurora*), Old Norse (*austr*), Old Saxon (*ost*), and Sanskrit (*usah*). Similarly, beyond that specific root, numerous languages use words connoting or derived from sunrise – or more generically 'rising' – to denote the East, including Arabic (*shurūq*), Chinese (*dōng* – involving a pictograph of the sun rising behind a tree), French (*levant*), Greek (*anatolé*), Hebrew (*mizrahi*), Latin (*oriens*), Russian (*vostok*), and Persian (*xavar*). Such terms are also the roots for other labels for the East, such as the 'Orient' (from the Latin *oriens*) and 'Asia' (from the Akkadian *asu*). With the West, the Proto-Indo-European root *wes* is likewise reflected in languages such as French (*ouest*), Greek (*hesperos*), Old Frisian, Middle Dutch, Dutch, and Old High German (*west*), Old Norse (*vestr*), and Latin (*vesper*). Again, beyond that specific root, numerous languages use words connoting or derived from sunset – or more generically 'falling' or 'resting' – to denote the West, including Arabic (*gharb*), Chinese (*xī*, with a pictograph that Sagart (2004) suggests may connote a bird settling into a nest), Hebrew (*maarab*), Russian (*západ*), and Latin (*occidens*). As with the East, these words are also the roots of other terms linked to the West. For instance, Europe may derive from the Semitic *ereb* (root of the Arabic *gharb* and Hebrew *maarab* above), arising in relation to the Phoenicians' colonisation of territories in the Mediterranean to their West from the 10th century BCE (Vasunia, 2012).

We should emphasise though that as these concepts were developing, East and West were not fixed in any relatively stable location (unlike in later epochs) but were relative to the people creating them. Indeed, people generally viewed themselves as a central reference point, as we discuss below. So, for instance, although North Africa (e.g., Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) might be deemed Eastern from a modern Western perspective, the Arabic term for this region is *Maghreb* – meaning 'sunset' – since this is how this region would be situated relative to an Arabian Peninsula perspective. Indeed, the etymology of 'Arab' itself, although often interpreted as being first used to convey meanings such as wanderer or nomadic, has been traced to the aforementioned Semitic *ereb*, potentially implying that people identified as Arabic were to the *West* of these Semitic speakers.

In any case, as cultures developed concepts of WvE, they began to attach symbolism and meaning to them. As befitting the direction of the dawn and the rising sun, the East is often associated with qualities such as birth, rebirth, renewal, life, and youth. These are reflected in the way that cardinal directions were often personified as deities – as per the animistic and polytheistic mindset of this era – with the East symbolised by goddesses of dawn such as *Ēostre* (Germanic), *Ēos* (Greek), Aurora (Roman), and *Usas* (Vedic). Such symbolism continued into the realm of history. In the Old Testament, for instance, the East is associated with the creation of life (Genesis 2:8 states that God 'planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed') (Meier, 1998). Likewise, in Christianity, the East – and similarly sunrise and dawn – was associated with Christ himself (the 'light of the world') and with his Resurrection and Second Coming. For that reason, early Christians would often pray facing East; as Origen wrote in On Prayer (AD 231): 'It should be immediately clear that the direction of the rising sun obviously indicates that we ought to pray inclining in that direction, an act which symbolises the soul looking towards where the true light rises' (Lang, 2009, p. 93).

Conversely, as similarly befits the direction of the dusk and the setting sun, the West was usually associated with ageing, death, and the afterlife, though these were not necessarily negatively coded, especially if the afterlife was construed in beneficent ways. For example, in various schools of Buddhism (e.g., 'Pure Land'), the West is associated with enlightenment (Lye, 2002). Such imagery is found cross-culturally and is frequently reflected in funeral and burial practices, evidence of which survives today, such as symbolism on Western walls of tombs and bodies arranged in a Westerly direction – ranging from Ancient Egypt (Omran, 2016) to Bronze Age burial sites in Central Asia (Sollohub, 1962). Such imagery persists to this day; in the Great War, for instance, the phrase 'Go West' was often used poetically as an image of soldiers dying (Seal, 2013).

In pre-history, we find a general association of East and West with sunrise and sunset, respectively, together with the associated symbolism (e.g., birth and death). Perhaps for this reason, East and West seem a more important dichotomy in this era than North and South, with most early maps prioritising East as their focal point by positioning it at the top, as discussed below. By contrast, before the discovery of polarity and the invention of the magnet (in China around the 2nd century BCE), North and South were often conceptualised merely in relation to East and West. The word North for example is thought to derive from the Proto-Indo-European unit *ner*, which can mean either 'left' (possibly reflecting the way the North is to the left as one faces the sun) or 'below' (possibly reflecting the way the sun is at its 'lowest' point when in the north).

However, despite the importance of WvE, significantly, people did not appear to regard themselves as being *in* the East or West. Rather, people tended to see themselves as being at the *centre* of the world. They may well have been aware of other peoples, even if only dimly, but these others were usually seen as being on the periphery or fringes of the world. Thus, even if people had developed a sense of WvE in terms of direction and symbolism, as far as humankind was concerned, the dominant conception seems to be more one of centre versus periphery. The evidence for this mode of understanding is again linguistic, but also cartographic.

In terms of linguistic evidence, this conception of centre-periphery is reflected in the names cultures give to themselves versus other peoples. Perhaps the clearest example is China, whose self-name – transliterated as *Zhōngguó* (中國) – literally means 'middle country'. One of the earliest articulations of the Chinese sense of their location in the world is found in the *Yu Gong*, one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature, describing the legendary Yu the Great and the provinces of his time, which most scholars believe was written in the 5th century BCE. In this, as elucidated by Wang (1999), the term

'four ends' (*sizhi*) was used to signify the utmost ends of the world (i.e., East, West, North, and South) at which one could only encounter vast oceans or deserts. Then, as Wang (1999) further articulates, in later centuries, as awareness of other places and peoples developed, the Chinese developed a conception of three zones – expanding outwards from China at the centre – depending on cultural affinities to and spatial distances from China. First was a 'Sinic Zone' (Korea, Vietnam, and sometimes Japan). Second, an 'Inner Asian Zone', featuring non-Han ethnic groups of nomadic tribes. Third, an 'Outer Zone' including regions in Southeast and South Asia, and Europe in later ages. The differences among the zones were reflected in nomenclature: most places in the Sinic Zone were allocated names – such as *Chaoxian* (Korea) or *Riben* (Japan) – which, if they did initially have derogatory meanings, eventually were lost; by contrast, states in the Inner Asian and Outer Zones were simply referred to by terms equivalent to 'barbarian' (e.g., *yi*, *fan*, and *man*).

Comparable forms of linguistic ethnocentrism can be found in many cultures and languages. Even if people did not include the idea of the 'centre' in their name, it is common for cultures to refer to themselves by terms that simply mean 'people'. This is seen, for example, in the original names of many Native North American peoples, such as 'Inuit'. Some other groups also qualify this label with an adjective that implies that, although other people are recognised, they are not thought especially highly of, such as 'Hopi', which etymologically is thought to mean 'peaceful people' or 'civilized people' (Graves, 2016), suggesting by contrast an awareness of other groups who are *not* peaceful or civilised. To that point, as per the names given by the Chinese to people in the Inner Asian and Outer Zones, it is common to find cultures referring to other peoples by names that are relatively derogatory or at least not bestowing upon them the same dignity and worth as one's own people.

Further support for this idea that pre-historic cultures tended to have a centre-periphery view comes from cartography. Put simply, most early maps put the people the map was created by/for at the centre, with other peoples and places situated towards the edge. Cartography extends far into pre-history, with some of the earliest surviving examples including a representation of a region near Pavlov in the Czech Republic carved on a mammoth tusk, dated to 25,000 BCE, and an Aboriginal Australian cylcon potentially depicting the Darling River, circa 20,000 BCE (Wolodtschenko & Forner, 2007). The art particularly excelled in Ancient Babylonia, involving accurate surveying techniques, such as a map of a river valley on a clay tablet dated to the 25th century BCE (Clark, 2016). Most famous is the Babylonian Imago Mundi, dated to the 6th century BCE (Delnero, 2017). It is the earliest known world map, though it is more symbolic than literal (e.g., it deliberately omits peoples such as the Persians and Egyptians, who were well known to the Babylonians). It centres on Babylon on the Euphrates, surrounded by a circular landmass including Assyria, Urartu (Armenia), and several cities, which in turn are surrounded by a 'bitter river' (*Oceanus*), with eight outlying regions (*nagu*) arranged around it in the shape of triangles, thereby forming a star.

Many other early maps – extending into history itself – maintain this centre-periphery orientation. For example, Anaximander (c. 610–546 BCE) is credited with creating one of the first literal world maps. Although no longer extant, surviving descriptions depict it as circular with the known lands of the world grouped around the Mediterranean Sea at the centre (Couprie et al., 2003). The sea was bisected by a line through Delphi – the world's 'gnomon' (i.e., central axis) – with the northern half called Europe and the southern half Asia. The habitable world – *oikoumenê* in Greek – consisted of small strips of land to the north (Spain, Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor) and south (Egypt and Libya) of the sea, plus lands to the east (Palestine, Assyria, Persia, and Arabia). Lands to the north were cold territories, inhabited by mythical people, and to the south, hot countries of 'burnt' people.

Interestingly, in many early maps, the cardinal directions were not located in the same spatial orientation as current maps. As Gordon (1971) articulates, the genesis of specifying four directions is thought to have emerged by people identifying a fixed point on the horizon and then deriving the other three directions from that. This fixed point was then given particular significance, which in cartographic terms usually meant placing it at the top of the map as if it were the direction people were facing. Crucially, given the symbolic significance of the East – signifying birth, life, renewal, etc., as argued above – it was common to situate *this* at the top and West at the bottom. Thus, people often construed themselves as facing East; in Hebrew, for example, the term for East literally means 'the front' and the West 'the back'.

There are exceptions; ancient China placed more significance on the north-south axis, even before but especially after their discovery of polarity and invention of the compass, thought to be during the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) (Guan & Bai, 2021). Again though, intriguingly, this too differed from contemporary orientations, being *South* bearing. But whichever way the directions were located, a centre-periphery mode of understanding was the norm in pre-history and indeed also moving into the epoch we call history. However, with this move into history, we also see the stirrings of the *spatialisation* of people. Instead of the dominant centre-periphery mindset, as cultures became increasingly aware of the significance and location of other peoples, there gradually emerged a view of oneself as existing in a particular *direction* relative to them. The first significant example of this is in the Classical age.

CLASSICAL AGE

Most scholars agree that perhaps the first main case of WvE spatialisation – and certainly the most well-preserved, significant, and influential – arose in the Classical age. Specifically, it occurred in the context of the wars between the Persians and the Greeks. The most famous and consequential account of this conflict – and hence of this emerging WvE binary – comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian and ethnographer, in his great work *Histories*. While the rivalry was long in the making, it came to its conclusion in 480-79 BCE with the famous Greek victories over the Persian king Xerxes at Salamis and Plataea. Herodotus posits real differences between the Greeks and the Persians, but his analysis also subtly complicates these distinctions, demonstrating how they are largely the product of convention and history rather than innate ethnic character or environmental determinism. In doing so, Herodotus portrays East and West in perpetual, dynamic tension, constantly informing and transforming each other through their interactions.

In purely geographical terms, the WvE divide forms an important structure for the narrative. In the beginning of the work, Herodotus recounts the story of Homer's *Iliad* and the war between the European Greeks and the Asian Trojans, explaining that this was the beginning of the perpetual rivalry between East and West (I.4). For the Persians, this invasion of Troy was a violation of natural geographic boundaries, 'because the Persians claim Asia and the barbarian races dwelling in it as their own, with Europe and the Greek states being, in their opinion, quite separate' (I.4).

Yet Herodotus also blurs these rigid geographic borders. Speaking of Europe, Asia, and Libya, he wonders why 'three distinct women's names should have been given to what is really a single land-mass' (IV.45), raising the possibility that such continental divisions might be merely conventional, rather than natural (Thomas, 2000). Additionally, the stark polarities of North and South reinforce the porosity of the WvE boundary. The Egyptians and Scythians live at the extreme edges of the world, the former in the torrid South and the latter in the frigid North, and their opposite climates produce totally opposite peoples (Hartog, 1988, pp. 15-19; Redfield, 1985, pp. 106-109). Whereas the northern and southern neighbours are completely determined by their extreme environments, the WvE axis is a location of exchange, adaptation, and transformation. Herodotus emphasises this fact by locating the start of the war in Lydia, on the frontier between Greece and Persia. Although Lydia was technically in Asia Minor, the Lydian king Croesus was extremely interested in Greek culture, and his empire served as a meeting point between the Persians and the Greeks (I.6-94). Political conflicts over Lydia and the neighbouring Ionia eventually ignited the war, and by beginning on the geographical and cultural margins, Herodotus blurred the boundaries between East and West (Pelling, 1997, p. 56).

Herodotus also complicates the WvE dichotomy through his constant shifting of perspectives. Although much of the book is told from the viewpoint of the Greeks, the very first and last episodes of the massive work are narrated through Persian eyes (I.1ff.; IX.122; see Flower, 2006, p. 274). He gives no hint that the actions or perspectives of the Persians are to be disparaged (Isaac, 2004, p. 262). In the famous proem, he states that he wrote the work so that '[G]reat and marvellous deeds – some displayed by the Greeks, some by barbarians – may not be without their glory'. This reference to the Persians as 'barbarians' should not be read as pejorative. In later centuries, the term had acquired a negative moral and cultural valence such that Plutarch could criticise Herodotus as a 'barbarophile' (Isaac, 2004, p. 273). However, for Herodotus, the term is not an insult but a self-conscious recognition of his own Greek perspective. In the second book, the historian notes that the Egyptians call

anyone who does not use their language a 'barbarian' (II.158), demonstrating the author's sensitivity to each culture's unique vantage point. While Herodotus freely adopts a Hellenocentric framework, he also recognises that other peoples placed themselves at the centre of the world.

Despite the complications and complexities that Herodotus introduces, he does point out substantial differences between the Greeks and Persians. One characteristic set of stereotypes, which informs much of Herodotus' political theory, is that of 'hard' and 'soft' peoples (Redfield, 1985, pp. 110-113). In his narration of Xerxes' invasion of Greece in 480 BCE, Herodotus understands the war as a conflict between the hardy, virile Greeks and the soft, languid Persians, whose luxury ultimately led to their demise. When the Spartan general Pausanias captured the Persian camp upon Xerxes' retreat, he scoffed at his enemies' lavish accommodations. He brought the Greek commanders to see the sumptuous tent of the Persian king 'to show [them] the folly of the Persians, who, living in this style, came to Greece to rob us of our poverty' (IX.82).

The most important difference between the Greeks and the Persians was their style of government. The Persians were ruled by a powerful monarch, while the Greeks governed themselves in (mostly) democratic city-states. To take one example, the contrast of Greek liberty and Persian despotism is clearly seen in the differing atmospheres of political speech. Wary of the king's wrath, the Persian advisers must proceed lightly (III.33-36, VII.8-12), while Greek politicians are free to warn of the dangers of tyranny and critique those in power (V.92, see Pelling, 1997, pp. 56-57; Rood, 2006, p. 276). Such themes have led scholars to read *Histories* as a tale of the conflict between western free democracy and eastern autocratic despotism (see Momigliano, 1979, p. 145ff, and the literature cited in Isaac, 2004, pp. 257-261).

Although Herodotus acknowledges these very real differences between East and West, he generally sees them as products of custom and convention, not as parts of a static ethnic or cultural identity. He writes, 'No race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persian', and he notes that the Persians have adopted their clothing from the Medes, their military dress from the Egyptians, and pederasty from the Greeks (I.135). The Persians were famous for their adaptability. Even the most distinctive Persian characteristic, their despotic monarchy, was a product of intentional choice. When Cyrus' son Darius re-established the Persian kingdom, Herodotus recorded a sincere debate about whether it should be democratic, aristocratic, or monarchical (III.80-82). Although Darius, the supporter of monarchy, eventually won out, there was no innate eastern drive towards despotism in Persia. The monarchy was a product of historical development and conscious choice (Isaac, 2004, p. 268; Gruen, 2011, p. 25). In Herodotus' view, the Persians could have easily chosen another option.

For Herodotus, the Persians' softness and luxury were also products of convention. They began as a hard people subjected under the Medes, but Cyrus enticed them to revolt by contrasting the pleasures of a feast (symbolic of political independence) with the agony of their forced labour (I.125-126). After the Persians overthrew their Median masters, their morals softened as their empire grew, and by 480 BCE, they had devolved to the standard of the languid and luxurious Xerxes (Redfield, 1985, pp. 110-113). The conclusion of *Histories* drives home this point. After Xerxes' expansionary designs had been rebuffed by the Greeks at Salamis in 480 and Plataea in 479, the final scene calls back to Xerxes' grandfather Cyrus the Great. When Cyrus was offered the option of imperial expansion into finer lands, he declined, saying 'Soft countries breed soft men' (IX.122). He understood that a growing empire would bring wealth, comfort, and decline. Through their territorial conquests, Xerxes and his father had eroded the Persian strength and discipline cultivated by their venerable ancestor. Cyrus' aphorism sums up Herodotus' entire perspective on the Greek-Persian dynamic: as culture is malleable, every contact and conflict between East and West contains dynamic, transformative potential.

Yet the final episode is not really about the Persians. Herodotus intends it as a warning to the Greeks (Forsdyke, 2006, pp. 230-233). After Athens played a leading role in defeating the Persian threat in 479, it rose to power over the next fifty years and acquired hegemony over most of Greece (see Thucydides I.89-117). Athens' imperial ventures led to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, which rent Hellas asunder. Herodotus lived through the beginning of the conflict, which began in 431, and his work makes several references to the chaos wrought by the Athenian empire. By closing the work with an admonition on the dangers of Persian imperialism, Herodotus reflects this message back on the Greeks, who are on the precipice of destruction for exactly the same reasons. In the Persians, Herodotus sees a mirror image of his own people, and a warning

for their future and what they may become. East and West may have their differences, but they both fall prey to the same temptations of human nature. In sum, in Herodotus' distinction between the Greeks and Persians, we see one of the earliest cases of the emerging East-West dichotomy. Herodotus mapped the Greek-Persian distinction onto the geographical axis of East and West, but he did not hold this to be a rigid boundary. It was a boundary that was largely conventional and a porous barrier that was constantly challenged by cultural exchange.

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

Our second historical tableau is set in 452 AD, just outside of Ravenna in Northern Italy, then capital of the Western Roman Empire. An army of Huns, hailing from the Pontic Steppe near the Black Sea and under the command of the fearsome Attila, is poised to pillage the city, just as they had sacked Aquileia and other towns further north along the Po Valley. They were met, not by an opposing Roman army – the emperor Valentinian III had fled the capital for refuge in southerly Rome, leaving the city in panicked disarray – but rather by an unarmed delegation headed by Pope Leo (later dubbed 'the Great'), who had ridden north from Rome seeking to persuade the Huns to turn back. 'By that time,' Beckwith (2009) remarks, 'Attila did not need much persuading. His troops were suffering due to the famine and plague in the region, and an army sent by [the Eastern Roman] Emperor Marcian had attacked the Huns' homeland in Pannonia. Attila withdrew and returned home' (p. 195). This near-sack of Ravenna marked the end of the first invasion of the West by nomadic horsemen from Central Asia in historical memory, but many more – the Avars, the Magyars, the Mongols, and the Turks – were to follow, setting a pattern that dominated much of WvE relations for the next thousand years (Keay, 2009).

Attila, as we have said, was met by Leo, bishop of Rome, then the most senior Christian leader within the now officially Christian Roman empire. That Rome eventually adopted Christianity is, from a historical perspective, a deep irony, for Christianity was itself an Eastern invader, born in the Empire's far Eastern province of Palestine as a daughter of Hellenistic Judaism. The Roman proconsul Pliny the Younger referred to earliest Christianity, which he was actively persecuting, as a 'depraved, immoderate superstition [*superstitionem pravam et immodicam*]' (1969, p. 288), while the first-century historian Tacitus, even as he decried the Emperor Nero's brutal persecution of Christians in Rome, dismissed Christianity as 'a pernicious superstition [*exitiabilis superstitio*]' (1937, 15.44, p. 283). Persecution notwithstanding, Christian missionary efforts eventually bore fruit in the conversion of increasing numbers of Romans, including the upper classes. These efforts eventually culminated in Emperor Constantine's extension of legal toleration to Christianity in 312 CE and finally in Emperor Theodosius' formal establishment of Christianity – or at least those elements of it adhering to the confession of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) – as the official imperial religion in 380 CE (MacMullen, 1984).

A further irony about the meeting of Leo and Attila presents itself: why was it a bishop rather than an emperor that rode out to meet the advancing horde? Leo was no doubt an exceptional individual, the man for the moment, but he found an opening to step into because of the increasing decrepitude and disarray of the Empire, particularly in the West. Since the death of Theodosius I in 394, the Empire had been ruled by two increasingly independent and even estranged Augusti, one with his capital at Constantinople in the East, and the other with his capital at Ravenna in the West. In 450, the Western empire was nearing its end, insofar as these matters can be cleanly demarcated. In 410, Rome itself had been sacked for the first time in its 900-year history; in 476, the last Western Roman emperor – at least until Charlemagne sought to renew the title – fittingly named Augustulus (little Augustus) would be deposed by the Ostrogoth king, Theodoric, who didn't bother to adopt the imperial style for himself (Heather, 2008).

This growing estrangement between Rome's East and West set the empire's two halves on decidedly different cultural trajectories, with a legacy that looms large even today. In the West, the relative political strength of church leaders, especially the Pope, provided a check on the growth of the state power, which contributed, in time, to the rise of constitutional principles such as the rule of law or limited government (Fukuyama, 2011, pp. 418-434). Equally consequential was the decision of later popes, notably Gregory the Great (r. 590-604 CE), to enforce an eccentric set of restrictions on cousin-marriage and divorce that indirectly brought about the destruction of Europe's tribal societies and their replacement by societies organised less by

kinship than by voluntary association via impersonal institutions such as law and the market (Fukuyama, 2011, pp. 73-87; Henrich, 2020, pp. 155-192). Conversely, the Greek-speaking East and its cultural heirs (e.g., Russia), which were isolated from these developments, found themselves set on a different course, more absolutist in government, more state-controlled in religion, and less individualistic in psychology (Fukuyama, p. 419; Henrich, pp. 177, 225-240).

The growing identification of Christianity with the Roman Empire in this period accounts for the religious conflict at the heart of much WvE interaction over the following 1500+ years, but in 450 or even centuries later, it would be a mistake to think of the Church as even predominantly a 'Western' institution. Even as Paul and Peter were setting their sights on Greece and Rome (cf. Acts 16:6-10), other missionaries, some of them also traditionally apostles of Jesus, such as Thomas and Jude, were heading East, into Syriac-speaking regions in the Sassanid Empire (Dognini & Ramelli, 2001). (Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, which was likely Jesus' first language.)

The missions to the East bore enormous fruit in the Church's first several centuries, resulting in large and largely independent Christian communities in Persia (King, 2018), and thence in Armenia (the first polity to become officially Christian with the conversion of Tiridates III in 301) (Stopka, 2016), Georgia (Rapp, 2007), the Malabar coast of India (Dognini & Ramelli, 2001), and, by the 8th century, the T'ang Capital of Chang'an, where Syriac-speaking missionaries arrived roughly a millennium before the first Jesuit missions introduced Catholicism to the Ming court (King, 2018).

In 451, just a year before Leo met with Atilla, the fragile communion between the imperial and extra-imperial churches was dealt a violent shock at the Council of Chalcedon, which circumscribed the ways of describing how Christ could be both fully divine and yet also fully human. Many of the Churches outside the Roman Empire rejected this Council – and others had rejected the similarly controversial Council of Ephesus (430), forming the 'Nestorian' Church of the East – resulting in a schism that divided the 'Western' imperial churches, both Greek- and Latin-speaking, from their co-religionists in Persia, Armenia, Egypt, Ethiopia, and beyond (Daley, 2018, pp. 174-232). These so-called 'Oriental Orthodox' churches flourished for centuries, though often only as tolerated minorities within officially Zoroastrian, Islamic, or (eventually) Communist empires. In the early modern period, increasing persecution led to a steady decline in their numbers, but they still count roughly 60 million adherents globally, most of them living outside of 'the West' as typically imagined today (Pew Research Center, 2017).

In summary, the late-ancient world saw several important developments in the relations between and conceptualisation of East and West, notably including the rise of Christianity as the dominant spiritual and moral force within the Roman Empire; the growing divides between the eastern and western halves of Rome, reinforced by and reinforcing growing divisions between eastern ('Orthodox') and western ('Catholic') Christians; and the first of many invasions of the West by mounted nomads from Central Asia.

THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Our third tableau focuses on the warring tribes and empires in the medieval world. Here we leap ahead another eight hundred years or so, to 1254 at the court of the Mongol Great Khan Möngke (r. 1251-59) in Karakorum, where a Flemish Franciscan named William of Rubruck (sc. Willem van Ruysbroek) heads the Christian contingent – grudgingly joined by local priests from the Church of the East – in a theological debate with Muslim clerics and Buddhist monks (Rubruck, 1900, p. 133). William's improbable journey into the heart of the Khanate neatly illustrates many of the critical dynamics of WvE relations in the High Middle Ages, including Western Europe's struggles with the Orthodox Byzantines; the civilisational conflict between Christendom and the Islamic empires that girdled it; the violent eruption of a new nomadic force, the Mongols, out of Central Eurasia; and underlying it all, the Silk Road, which knitted the continent together from Beijing to Paris.

William's journey to the East began with his departure from Paris in 1248 on the Seventh Crusade (1248-1250), led by King Louis IX to recapture Jerusalem from the reigning Islamic Ayyubid dynasty (Jackson, 2020). The Crusades were of course at the heart of the cultural and frequently military rivalry of European Christianity and the Islamic world in the Middle Ages

(Riley-Smith, 2005). In the seventh century, the Arab tribes, newly united (according to their later traditions) by the Prophet Muhammad, burst into the predominantly Christian Levant and, over the course of roughly a century, created an empire running continuously from Spain to the borders of China (Hodgson, 1974).

The fractious Islamic states, which now controlled much of Eurasia, generally tolerated Christians, Jews, and even Zoroastrians in their midst, who were granted the protected, if decidedly second-class, legal status of *dhimmitude*, which subjected them to additional taxes and restricted their ability to preach or even build and repair their places of worship (Friedman, 2003). (Later, Frankish rulers in the Crusader states would impose similar legal disabilities on their Muslim subjects (Riley-Smith, 2005, p. 72).) By the late eleventh century, simmering European resentment boiled over in the face of reports of atrocities committed by Arabs against Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem, which inspired a movement to retake the Holy Land for Christians (Riley-Smith, 2005, pp. 1-23).

After an overwhelming success in the First Crusade, which captured not only Jerusalem but nearly all of the Levant, the European forces, overextended by the long distances and hampered by the reluctance of the suspicious Byzantines (a later and prejudicial name, as it happens; the Greek dynasts still simply described themselves as 'Romans') to join the fight, were slowly pushed back by the Arabs. Later Crusades consisted principally of rear-guard actions to stem the losses or largely futile efforts to reverse them (Riley-Smith, 2005).

These efforts frequently went awry, but never more disastrously than in the Fourth Crusade (1204), when a Frankish army, angry at debts owed them by the Byzantine emperor Alexios V, whom they had helped install just a month before in a palace coup, sacked Constantinople and installed a Frankish regime loyal to the Pope and the Western 'Holy Roman Emperor' (Riley-Smith, 2005, pp. 157-58). The Latin Empire of Constantinople was short lived (1204-1261) but still controlled the city and its hinterland when William of Rubruck passed through in 1253 on his way to the Khanate.

The sack of Constantinople did irreparable damage to relations between the Latin and Greek halves of Roman Christianity, widening a gulf that had been growing for centuries, driven by theological and political differences, notably over the primacy of the Pope, which most Greek Christians rejected or heavily qualified. While the 'official' start of the Great Schism between the Latins and the Greeks is typically dated to 1054 when the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople mutually anathematised one another (cf. Chadwick, 2003, pp. 211-212), this event did much less to shape popular sentiment than the shocking violence of the Fourth Crusade, which left the Byzantines intensely suspicious of further 'assistance' from the West (Chadwick, 2003, pp. 235-237). The resulting isolation of Constantinople from Christian allies was a key factor in its eventual fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, who then pressed deep into Europe, even besieging Vienna in 1529 and again in 1683.

Even as Latin and Greek Christians fought one another and the Islamic empires, the Mongols were rewriting the map of Eurasia. Much as the Arabs had united under Muhammad and then conquered much of the known world, the Mongols, newly united by Chinggis Khan in the 1220s, exploded out of Central Asia and toppled kingdom after kingdom. By 1250, the Khanate had united central Asia, captured most of northern China (leaving a rump Song dynasty to fester in the South until the 1270s), raced across the (now) Russian steppe, and pressed into Europe, defeating a European coalition in Poland in 1241. The Mongols only refrained from driving further into Europe because word reached them of the death of Ogedei, Chinggis's successor as Great Khan, prompting a mad scramble of generals back to Karakorum to vie for promotion (Beckwith, 2009, pp. 333-345).

From Louis IX's perch in the Crusader stronghold of Acre, news of the Mongols was both ominous and intriguing: they had threatened Europe but now also hung like the sword of Damocles over the Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East. Perhaps they could be enlisted as allies against Islam? Despite the failure of several prior embassies to the Mongol court, rumours that a key Mongol leader – Sartaq Khan, ruler of the Western half of the Golden Horde – had converted to Christianity inspired Louis to make another, subtler overture by sending William of Rubruck as a Franciscan missionary to take stock of things and report back (Rubruck, 1900, p. 10).

Though William was not the first medieval European visitor to the Far East, his is the earliest surviving eyewitness account of such a journey, predating Marco Polo's more famous and more southerly travels to the court of Kublai Khan at Beijing by a generation (Polo, 1958). In William's *Itinerarium*, we see an educated European attempting to make sense of a world that had suddenly grown far larger and stranger than he had hitherto imagined; early on, he comments about his first encounter with Mongols (or Tatars, as they were known in Russia), 'I really felt as if I were entering some other world' (Rubruck, 1900, p. 12). He offers a vivid account of life in a Mongol camp, including reasonably accurate depictions of the making of yurts and *kumis*, fermented mare's milk (Rubruck, 1900, pp. 12-20). After meeting Sarqat, he was passed along – much to his chagrin and discomfort – progressively farther east, first to Sarqat's father, Baatu, and then by Baatu to the Great Khan Möngke himself in impossibly remote Karakorum (Rubruck, 1900, p. 20, 90). He describes frequent encounters with representatives of both 'Nestorian' Christianity (i.e., the Church of the East) and Armenian, 'miaphysite' Christians (Rubruck, pp. 42-48, i.a.), all of whom he regarded as heretics and treated with considerable suspicion and disdain (which they frequently seem to have returned), but with whom he also made a common cause in half-baked schemes to bring about the baptism of the various Khans he visited or to confound their non-Christian rivals (Rubruck, 1900, pp. 94-95).

Particularly interesting are William's impressions of Buddhists, as he is among the earliest Western Europeans to encounter the Dharma. He typically refers to Buddhists as 'idolaters' (e.g., Rubruck, 1900, p. 66, i.a.), which reflects both typical Buddhist worship and still more William's own efforts to locate them on his familiar religious map, where 'Christian', 'Jew', 'heretic' (a category that for most medieval Christians included Islam), and 'idolater' or 'pagan' exhausted the terrain (e.g., Augustine, 1865, 5.9–6.11). However, he also frequently refers to Buddhists as 'Tuins', which seems to reflect the Chinese epithet, *t'ao-ren*, or 'men of the Way' (Rubruck, 1900, p. 78) and he occasionally describes them in vivid detail: 'All the priests of the idolaters shave their heads, and are dressed in saffron color... Wherever they go, they have in their hands a string of one or two hundred beads, like our rosaries, and they always repeat these words, *on mani baccam*, which is "God, thou knowest", as one interpreted it to me' (1900, p. 70). Although the interpretation he was given is almost certainly spurious, the picture of a saffron-clad monk fingering his beads and chanting the traditional mantra '*oṃ maṇipadme hūṃ*' is highly plausible (cf. Studholme, 2002).

William described Karakorum as a cosmopolitan city, with quarters for the 'Saracen' (=Muslim) and 'Cathayan' (= Chinese) population, twelve Buddhist temples, two mosques, and one (Nestorian) church (1900, p. 127). During his stay in this city, the Great Khan arranged a debate among the city's Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian clerics. While William's account of this episode is clearly partial (both incomplete and biased), there are hints of genuine interreligious encounter, as in the Buddhists' critique of the Christian and Muslim commitment to monotheism and creation *ex nihilo*: 'Fools say that there is only one God, but the wise that there are many' (Rubruck, 1900, p. 141). This debate is perhaps most interesting for what made it possible, namely the Khan's ambivalence towards all three of the dominant religions in his newly-taken territories. While most of the Mongol rulers – in the Golden Horde, the Il-Khanate in the Middle East, the Mughals in India – eventually converted to Islam, some in the thirteenth century also adopted Buddhism, such as the emperors of the Yuan Dynasty in China, but also, farther west, Hulegu Khan, founder of the Il-Khanate in former Persian and Abbasid territory, who was 'a Buddhist with two Nestorian Christian wives (Hildinger, 1997, p. 148; Beckwith, 2009, p. 339). In the same period, Christian missionaries of many confessions also assiduously sought the Khans' conversion, as William's journey attests. Had the rulers of the Ilkhanate become durably Buddhist or those of the Golden Horde adopted Christianity, the subsequent history of Eurasia, and *ipso facto* the wider world, might well have been altogether different.

Although William's journey was deeply enmeshed in his age's many overlapping conflicts – of Western Europe with the Byzantines, of Christendom with Islam, of all the above and many others with the Mongols – it was ultimately made possible by peaceful networks of trade and cultural exchange, the fabled Silk Road, that for centuries linked East Asia to the Levant and thence to Europe via a slender thread of Central Asian oasis towns, such as Samarkand, Merv, and Bukhara (cf. Frankopan, 2016; Hansen, 2012). In historical terms, far more significant than the movement of armies over these caravan routes in the Middle Ages was the movement of goods, ideas, and pathogens from the far East, which in this period was the richest,

most populous, and technologically most advanced region in the world, to the receptive West: 'Arabic' numerals (actually developed in India), gunpowder, paper, and the compass, along with the Black Death, made their way from Asia to Europe, where they were refined and widely adopted, making possible the revolutionary developments of the early modern period.

By the high Middle Ages, relations between East and West had once again been profoundly reshaped by ideological and geopolitical developments. Tensions between Orthodox and Catholic Christians reached fever pitch after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 and contributed in no small measure to the ultimate failure of the Crusades, which were but one front in the centuries-long conflict between Islamic and Christian dominions, while the rise of the Mongols' Eurasian empire spelled not only conquest but also unprecedented exchange along trade routes such as the Silk Road.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Our next era of interest is the European Enlightenment, of which 1772 can be considered the high-water mark. That year witnessed the publication of the final volumes of the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* [Encyclopedia, or Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, the Arts, and the Professions]. The *Encyclopédie* had begun with modest ambitions more than two decades earlier, but under the editorial supervision of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, it eventually filled thirty-three large volumes with more than 74,000 articles, 2,800 engravings, and copious other materials (see Brewer, 2011, for an overview). As a publishing and business venture, the *Encyclopédie* was ambitious. As an intellectual project, it was positively audacious. The preface to the first volume had promised that it would expose 'as much as is possible, the order and sequence of human knowledge' as well as 'the body and substance' of every science and art. In short, it aspired to give an overview of all human knowledge, including knowledge of civilisations beyond Europe.

For all its aspirations to universality, the *Encyclopédie* was the undertaking of a particular community of French intellectuals. These *philosophes* had diverse interests and convictions, but they had all been shaped by a literary culture that had an endless appetite for books and letters that recounted voyages to the East. There was a great deal of this kind of literature. By the second half of the eighteenth century, Europeans had been reporting on their encounters in the East for centuries. Western Europeans had long interacted with the civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. Starting in the late fifteenth century, the Portuguese ventured farther east and opened up trade routes to India and China. By the time of the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, the Jesuits had been established in China for more than two centuries.

The *Encyclopédistes* were hardly unique in their fascination with the East. A keen interest in the ancient civilisations of the Near East (*Levant*) and Far East (*Orient*) was a hallmark of the Enlightenment as a whole (Osterhammel, 2018). The *Encylopédie* included thousands of articles – long and short – devoted to describing the geography, culture, religion, and commerce of different regions of the world. Many of these articles provided information – or sometimes misinformation – about the peoples and lands of Asia. The Encyclopédistes relied on accounts that were often inaccurate, but they tried to communicate information as accurately as possible. At the same time, they attempted to compare Asian religions, polities, and customs with European ones. They often used these comparisons to condemn barbarism in the East and the West (Harvey, 2012). This was one of the main reasons they undertook these comparisons. At least since at least the publication of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* in 1721, Enlightenment thinkers had made a habit of using real or imagined Eastern observers to highlight the failings of their nearer neighbours. In many of these comparisons, the peoples of the East seemed more civilised than those of the West.

The text of the *Encyclopédie* often displayed admiration for the civilisations of Asia despite the fact that 'the peoples of the vast continent are little known to us' (section on *Asie*). The entry on 'China' (*Chine*), for example, calls that country 'the most populated and best cultivated country in the world'. The author notes that the Chinese had employed paper, printing, and gunpowder long before those inventions were known in Europe. The *Encyclopédistes* were particularly enamoured with the Chinese state, which they praised as being 'very gentle' in its dealings with the people. They especially appreciated the order

of Mandarins (*Mandarine*) who received their posts based on merit rather than birth and were accordingly known for their 'intelligence and fairness'. The Mandarines were even permitted to correct the Emperor when he erred. At the same time, although the Chinese were undoubtedly the most advanced in Asia and had an efficient government, they were perceived as lacking the knack for invention and discovery that so distinguished Europe. Diderot wrote, 'in general, the spirit of the Orient is more tranquil, more lazy, more concerned with essential needs' than that of the dynamic, entrepreneurial West.

The *Encyclopédia's* evaluation of India was similarly mixed. The author of its entry (*Inde*), the prolific Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, noted that the sciences had been established in India much earlier than in Europe or even Egypt. The Indians had excelled from ancient times in astronomy, mathematics, and manufacturing. They were even the inventors of the noble game of chess. Tragically, Jaucourt wrote, Indian science had slipped from its preeminent position even as their religion degenerated from its original theism into a superstitious polytheism. They had little ability to arrest this slide. The oppressive climate had made them timid and indolent. Moreover, they suffered from a tyrannical form of government that left the weak with no recourse against the strong.

In their evaluations of the East, the *Encyclopédistes* repeatedly hit on a few themes. They were very interested in Eastern manufactured goods – especially textiles – that often surpassed those produced in the West. They were also convinced that the standard Eastern form of government was 'despotism', as evidenced by the tyrannical governments of 'Turkey, the Mughal Empire, Japan, Persia, and nearly all of Asia'. The despotic vesting of all power in a single ruler reduced the rest of a nation's citizens to a single rank – that of slaves. This tyrannical polity necessarily had harmful effects on the population, leaving them 'timid and dejected' (*Despotisme*). However, they did not necessarily attribute the prevalence of despotism to distinctive features of Asian psychology, nor did they think despotism the universal condition of Asian peoples. China was the great exception to the rule of Eastern despotism.

The *Encyclopédistes* were also interested in the moral condition of the Asian peoples. While many Europeans stereotyped the East as mired in a decadent luxury, the *Encyclopédie* was ambivalent about whether this was an essential feature of Asia. It notes a pattern in which great empires of the East *and* West had risen from simplicity, grown despotic and decadent over time, and then fallen into ruin. However, it suggests that bad government was more to blame than luxury. The author of the entry on 'luxury' (*Luxe*) wrote, 'If to prove to me the dangers of luxury, you were to cite Asia plunged into luxury, misery, and vices, I would ask that you show to me in Asia, China excepted, a single nation where the government was concerned with the morals and happiness of the majority of its subjects'. Bad government was more to blame for the weakness of the East than predilection for leisure and consumption.

Overall, the *Encyclopédie* suggests that the Enlightenment view of the East was mixed and inconsistent. The *philosophes* drew on old stereotypes of the Asian peoples as indolent and reduced to slavery by despotic government, but they also recognised the intellectual achievements of Chinese, Indian, and Arab scholars in fields such as philosophy, religion, and mathematics. They also could not help but admire the sophistication of Asian manufactured goods such as silks. They generally did not think that cultural differences between the East and the West were inevitable. Moreover, the *Encyclopédistes* frequently used the East as a mirror that could reveal the blemishes of European states.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the *Encyclopédie*'s thinking about the East is the assumption that the East is fundamentally intelligible. At least parts of the East were tormented by despotism and decadence, but this condition could be understood as the result of bad governance, something Europeans were very familiar with, and perhaps an unfavourable climate. At the same time, the comparativists of the *Encyclopédie* were conscious that they were writing about civilisations that were often older and more sophisticated than their own. The comparison between East and West often turned up much to admire. This admiration finds resonance in our final era of interest, namely the Cold War.

THE COLD WAR

Our last era of interest brings us into contemporary times, in which the dizzying pace of change has generated truly shape-shifting and complex WvE dynamics. Perhaps these are exemplified best by a nation such as South Korea, which over recent decades has been positioned as both Western *and* Eastern to an extent. In terms of focusing our attention more precisely, we might select 1988 as an especially noteworthy historical moment for the nation. First, though, it is worth giving some brief historical context to this era and the significance of South Korea. In that respect, the most salient reference point is the Cold War, arguably the most consequential and emblematic event in modern times in terms of WvE dynamics. Indeed, the war *itself* is often interpreted primarily through the lens of such dynamics, being understood as a conquest between the 'Western bloc' (i.e., the USA and its allies) and the 'Eastern bloc' (i.e., the Soviet Union and its allies).

However, this very interpretation shows how complicated these dynamics are. This point is made most vividly by considering the status of the Soviet Union. Essentially, whether this is deemed a Western power, an Eastern power, or neither, has been a perennial topic of debate – both within and outside the Soviet Union – and indeed *still is* (White et al., 2010). It is beyond our scope here to drill into the nuances of this debate, but the most salient point here is simply that it exists: there is no way to definitively categorise the Soviet Union – nor the post-Soviet states – as East or West. This very fact highlights the shifting and contentious nature of the WvE polarity, both through history and in the present. In any case, complexities of the Soviet Union notwithstanding, the Cold War involved an extensive period of hostilities between the Western and Eastern blocs, usually considered as spanning the announcement of the Truman doctrine in March 1947 (i.e., in which the primary stated foreign policy goal of the US was to contain Soviet geopolitical expansion) to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (Gaddis, 2005).

What is the significance of South Korea here? The territory of the Korean peninsula has a long and complex history, the details of which are beyond our scope here. However, in terms of its significance to our WvE considerations, the following facts are especially salient (see e.g., Buzo, 2016). The peninsula had been united as one kingdom from the 7th century onwards, ruled first by the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), then the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), before becoming the Korean Empire (1897-1910). However, in 1910, the Koran Empire was annexed into the Empire of Japan, a period of rule that lasted until Japan's surrender at the end of World War II (September 1945). Crucially, at this point, the two great allied powers, the USA and the Soviet Union, agreed to divide Korea along the 38th parallel into two zones of occupation, with the former administering the South and the latter the North.

This was initially intended as a temporary arrangement (Loth, 2004). However, as Cold War tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union began to take root, by 1948 the occupied zones had become sovereign states: in the North, backed by the Soviets, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established by Kim Il-Sung as a communist state; conversely, in the South, with the support of the USA, the Republic of Korea was founded by the authoritarian leader Syngman Rhee as a capitalist state. In this way, tensions between North and South became emblematic of, and indeed a proxy for, the Cold War hostilities between the USA and the Soviet Union. These troubles then of course came to a head with the Korean War, which began on 25th June 1950, when the North invaded the South, and continued until the armistice on 27th July 1953, a tense and fragile agreement that is still in place today (but which is not actually a formal peace treaty, meaning the countries are technically still at war).

Such are some of the basic historical facts and recent context regarding South Korea. Most relevant here, however, is its ambiguous status regarding WvE dynamics. Essentially, from certain perspectives, it could be regarded as an Eastern country. This is certainly so geographically; indeed, as an East Asian nation, it is almost prototypically Eastern (compared to other countries, which while technically in the geographic East are closer to the periphery). Moreover, it is also often considered culturally and socially Eastern, as we discuss further below. Yet, the relevance of discussing the Cold War is that, in that historical period at least, as a capitalist state backed by the USA, South Korea was an integral part of the *Western* bloc. Likewise, it is central to an aggregation historically used as a synonym for the Western bloc, namely the 'first world', defined

by Webster as 'the highly developed industrialised nations often considered the westernised countries of the world'. This is in contrast to the 'second world' of the Eastern bloc, and the 'third world' (those countries in neither bloc), a taxonomy first proposed by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952. Over time though, the taxonomy became more contentious, especially in the way – perhaps inevitably, given the nomenclature – the labels seemed to imply a ranking, particularly economically, whereby the First World came to imply countries that were more affluent and prosperous while the Third World became a signifier for poorer, less 'developed' countries, especially in Africa. As a result, towards the end of the 20th century, this framework fell out of favour, replaced by distinctions such as 'developed' versus 'developing' countries, which took over the mantle of First and Third World categories, respectively (with Second World countries falling into either, as appropriate). However, this too has its critics, not least because deeming a country developed or otherwise still brings the kind of normative judgement and symbolic baggage associated with the First and Third World labels (Lomas, 2023). In any case, South Korea remains a core member of groupings that have been vested with similar meanings to the 'first world', such as the G20 (a forum of most of the world's largest economies, though this also includes Russia, so does not map neatly onto the first and second world distinction).

If we were to view the Cold War through the prism of the Western bloc achieving victory at the expense of the Eastern bloc, South Korea is certainly among the winners. This was the reason for citing 1988 as an especially meaningful year in these dynamics. This is of course one year before the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked the effective end of the Cold War in the 20th century (even if recent events involving Russia have left people wondering whether the war has indeed ended). Nineteen eighty-eight was the year South Korea hosted the 24th Summer Olympics, widely viewed and celebrated as the culmination and worldwide recognition of the 'economic miracle' that the country had achieved over recent years, a form of 'coming out party' for the nation (Bridges, 2008).

Indeed, its rise was remarkable, being among the fastest-growing global economies from the early 1960s to the late 1990s, and indeed recording the world's very *fastest* rise in average GDP per capita between 1980 and 1990, with World Bank data showing an annual growth rate of 8.63% (compared to the USA, for example, at only 2.37%). As a result, it was heralded as one of the four 'Asian Tiger' economies (alongside Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan). Moreover, its economic prosperity continues to this day. The country was one of the few to avoid a recession following the 2008 financial crisis, and in 2023 ranked 6th worldwide in the number of companies on the Fortune 500 with 18 companies (headed by Samsung Electronics, ranked 25th). Thus, South Korea is certainly a leading light of the industrialised world, and, moreover, in some respects – given its previous standing as part of the Western bloc – is often perceived as a relatively Westernised nation (Jeong, 2017).

However, as this paper has illustrated, East and West are relative terms. Thus, when compared to certain nations, such as North Korea, South Korea may be judged as comparatively Western, but positioned in contrast to nations such as the USA, it tends to be coded as distinctly *Eastern*. There are many such examples, for instance, in the myriad business articles that seek to compare occupational cultures among companies in South Korea and the USA. In these, we often encounter various stereotypes pertaining to WvE, though these appraisals can be both positive and negative as well as both traditional (i.e., with long-standing historical themes) and modern (i.e., trends emerging more recently).

On the negative side of the ledger, for instance, are articles bemoaning a perceived 'toxic work culture' in South Korea. Khameneh (2022), for instance, writes that 'Korean corporate culture' is characterised by 'long hours, suffocating hierarchy, and monotonous tasks', in which 'gapjil, the Korean word for authoritarian, toxic relationship dynamics, is embedded in the culture of the country's industrial giants' (paragraph 4). Indeed, this may not necessarily be an unfounded stereotype. A survey of South Koreans from 2021 showed that over 80% of respondents deemed *gapjil* a serious social problem (Yonhap, 2021). Making a similar point, the Economist (2021) accused South Korea of having a 'notoriously punishing' work culture, which it also linked to *gapjil*, suggesting it licensed 'the authoritarian attitude of senior managers who abuse their power to shout at underlings, insist on unpaid all-nighters and weekend work, assign personal errands, and force juniors to go out drinking for hours upon hours' (paragraph 2). To the latter point, another poll highlighted an issue with the Korean

tradition of *hoeshik*, mandatory after-work meal and drink gatherings, about which 95% of office-employee respondents expressed relief at not having to attend due to COVID-19 restrictions (Choi, 2022). In such analyses, even if accurate, we might nevertheless discern the kind of traditional 'Orientalist' stereotypes identified by Said (1979), such as a relative lack of individual freedom and autonomy that Eastern cultures – as seemingly more 'collectivist' – are frequently thought to be characterised by.

However, generalisations that are far more complimentary and more modern are also found. An article in Nature, for example, attributes South Korean global leadership in information technologies to a top-down innovation system that promotes 'close collaboration between government, industry, and the academic community in the process of nation building' (Dayton, 2020, paragraph 17). Similarly, an article by Roll (2021) sought to explain the notion of '*hallyu*' – a Chinese term meaning 'Korean wave', which refers to the phenomenal growth and worldwide popularity of South Korean products and culture – with reference to the nation's express goal to develop its 'soft power' and be a leading exporter of popular culture as well as features such as 'superior quality, cutting edge designs, and a contemporary feel for the products and services' (paragraph 14).

Indeed, such qualities have been associated with East Asian cultures more broadly, where states such as Japan and Taiwan have likewise developed particular reputations for high-end technological innovation and expertise. In that respect, we might observe a new wave of stereotypes where Eastern cultures are praised as being especially technologically advanced, excelling in intelligence, creativity, and design. However, there is still a trend of connecting such attributes to more traditional features of such societies. Japanese companies such as Toyota have been celebrated for pioneering occupational philosophies such as *heijunka*, described as a 'lean' production method that aims to 'elegantly' meet demand by reducing waste (Black, 2007). In turn, *heijunka* has been linked to Zen philosophy and practice, which similarly valorises this kind of sparse and efficient yet elegant and harmonious aesthetic and way of living (Hutchinson & Liao, 2009; Lomas et al., 2017).

These are, of course, but a few select examples of contemporary stereotypes that are attached to Eastern cultures such as Japan and South Korea in the modern age. Similarly, our primary focus in this final section on South Korea is also but one example of the complexities of WvE dynamics in recent years. However, such selectivity and partiality is a key point here. As we have sought to demonstrate throughout the article, there are many ways of conceptualising and understanding WvE distinctions. As such, we should be wary of merely viewing WvE differences through the lens of any one comparison or era, and instead be attentive to the incredible dynamic complexity of this binary.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the WvE distinction has been a salient feature of human cultural development from time immemorial, with increasing importance over the past 2,500 years or so. We began in the era of pre-history, where etymological analyses indicated that these concepts mainly functioned as mere spatial orientation terms related to the passage of the sun, with East and West associated with sunrise and sunset, respectively. It was not until around the 5th century BCE that people began to regard *themselves* as being in either the East or West, and to attach markers of personal identity and meaning to these locations. Our first historical epoch then focused on what is widely considered to be the emergence of this kind of spatialised understanding, namely the wars between the Greeks and the Persians. However, even though Herodotus drew clear distinctions between the two peoples, he constantly subverts the idea of a static East-West dichotomy; while pointing out legitimate differences, he presents these disparities between Greeks and Persians as contingent and mutable and establishes the East-West axis as one of transformation and exchange.

The second era witnessed the rise of Christianity as a dominant cultural form across much of Eurasia, one whose fractiousness, already on display in the 5th century, helps to explain some important cultural variations between Western Europe and its neighbours, both in the Orthodox world and farther East. In the third era, we found Eurasia as a stage for clashing armies and vibrant trade, as Latin crusaders vied with Orthodox Byzantines, both battled Islamic armies, and all the rest looked

with trepidation on the explosion of the Mongols from Central Asia. The fourth era saw the Europeans of the Enlightenment trying to systematise their knowledge of the East following centuries of increasing interaction, finding much to admire and some things to criticise. Finally, we turned our attention to the present day, where we focused in particular on South Korea in the Cold War and its aftermath as emblematic of the complexities and tensions of WvE dynamics in the modern era.

It is hoped that this analysis will deepen and enrich the understanding and discourse around WvE in contemporary scholarship. While Said's analysis of Orientalism is rightly still influential and relevant, his analysis – which mainly attends to the issues surrounding the relationship between Western Europe and the East in the 19th century – is only one part of the WvE story. As we have seen, the WvE polarity is a complex and contested binary, whose boundaries and contours have constantly shifted, with East and West being relative terms (e.g., the ancient Greeks were West compared to the Persians, but East in contrast to Rome). Indeed, this dynamic tension between the polarity has been a continual source of creation, innovation, and change, whether ideas about government, Nestorian Christianity, European gunpowder, or Toyota automobiles. As such, this paper will ideally encourage scholars to adopt a more subtle and nuanced understanding of its dynamics, to avoid the conventional stereotypes that often haunt discourse in this area (e.g., simplistically painting the West as individualistic and the East as collectivistic) and to engage more thoughtfully and creatively with this fundamental distinction that remains – despite all its issues – a central way of parsing and conceptualising the world in which we live.

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