OCCIDENTALISM

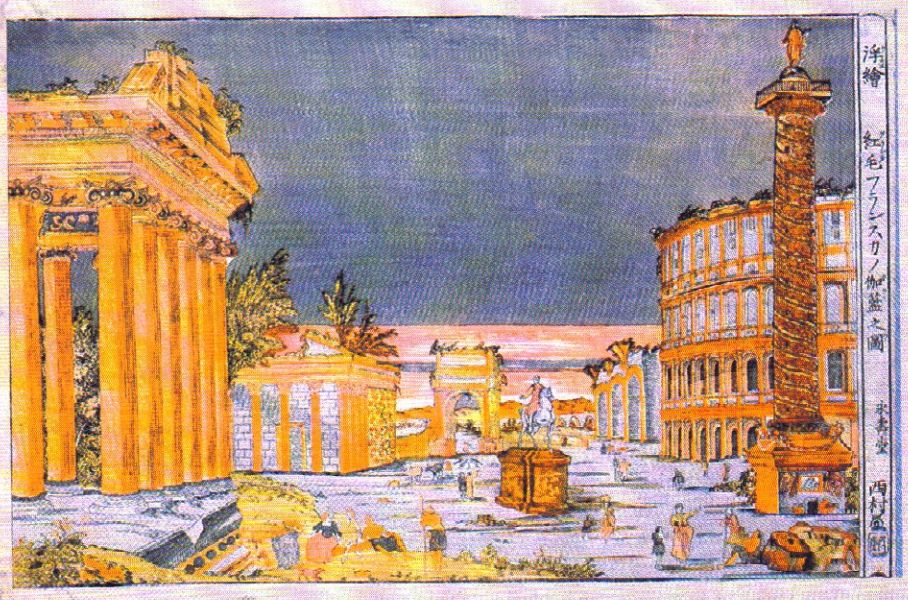
Alastair Bonnett discusses Eastern ideas of the West, and argues they form part of a non-Western debate on modernity and society.

THE V&A'S NEW EXHIBITION 'Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800' is about a mutual fascination and mutual 'myth-making' of two cultural worlds. A playful curiosity animates many of the pieces on display: all those hairy and probably pungent Europeans depicted by Japanese artists seem anything but menacing. The exhibition's cut-off date of 1800 suggests a desire to avoid the painful era of European domination, thereby nodding to Edward Said's influential portrait, in *Orientalism* (1978), of the last two centuries as characterised by the power of the West to control the image of the East.

Said focused on how the West made 'the rest'. Yet in recent years a number of 'Eastern' scholars, such as Sun Ge and Xiaomei Chen in China, have explored how the West has been formed in the non-Western imagination. This 'occidentalist' research reveals a growing interest in how the West has been stereotyped and deployed as an idea in the service of political ambitions in non-Western countries.

As far as I know, the earliest sustained elaboration in English of the West as a political and cultural unit is from a spiky Social Darwinist, Benjamin Kidd. His *Principles of Western Civilisation* (1902) looked forward to a world of ceaseless struggle, arguing that 'We are *par excellence* the military peoples, not only of the entire world, but of the evolutionary process itself'. There are many earlier uses of the term, but they neither reflected nor established the West as a social and political identity. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Hegel had built on traditional notions of human destiny travelling westwards into order to locate the Enlightenment in Protestant Germany. Yet even Hegel's Occident, though symbolically laded, remained thinly sketched.

The idea of the West we know today is the product of the last century. Noisy contrariness is one of its most conspicuous characteristics. From Kidd's celebration of Western militarism to *Why the West has Won* (Victor Davis Hanson, 2001), fanfares for Western global supremacy have been deafening. Yet over the same period, from James Little's *The Doom of Western Civilization* (1907) to Patrick Buchanan's *The Death of the West* (2003) the West's death-knell has tolled just as boisterously.



Woodblock of the Roman Forum (1770-90) by the Japanese artist Utagawa Toyoharu; from the V&A exhibition 'Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800'.

Why do people have such different experiences of the West? Is it easier to see the West from within or from without? Being an outsider may have advantages. Outsiders have produced, if not more consistent, certainly earlier and more sustained debates on the meaning and nature of the West.

The oldest heritage of discovering and interpreting the West is from China. Accounts of 'Traditions Regarding Western Countries' were a regular part of dynastic histories from the fifth century AD. Explorers returned from the exotic lands of the setting sun with tales of lapis lazuli palaces and 'lambs which grow in the ground'. As contact increased, Westerners were accorded a collective identity. This, in turn, implied the need for an Eastern identity.

In the early eighteenth century the Japanese court intellectual Arai Hakuseki contrasted Eastern 'spiritual civilisation' with the 'material civilisation' of the West. This distinction fed into an evolving debate on the character of the West. Thus Japan's most influential Westerniser, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834-1901), was using established stereotypes when he called for Japan to 'leave Asia' and enter the 'rational civilisation' of the Occident. In 1862 Fukuzawa was part of the Takenouchi mission, the first official Japanese investigation of Western society and industrial development. His glowing account of what he saw was published in 1866 as *Conditions in the West* and became an immediate bestseller.

Fukuzawa's West was a meritocracy. In his *Outline of a Theory of Civilisation* he depicted the West as an open society, in which intellectual enquiry occurred 'right down to the remotest village'. 'This process is repeated many times' he argued, and, 'in the end, a national opinion takes shape'. The West did not contain cleverer people, but valued clever people more; in Japan by contrast, he complained, people

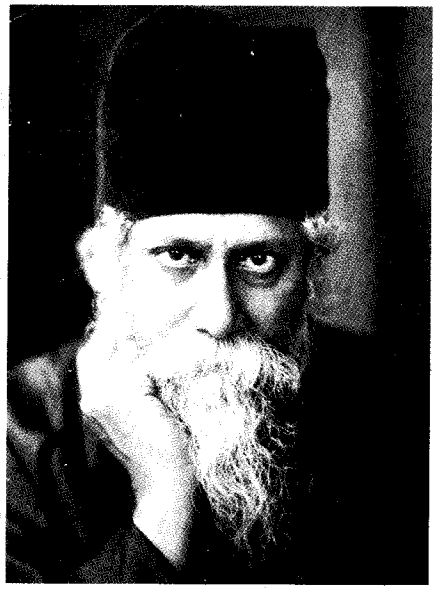
> were leading inconspicuous lives as doctors or writers.... All of them were learned men who could not realise their ambitions in society.

Fukuzawa's representation of the West was a political lever, designed to service his ambitions for the redistribution of power between the traditional elite and an aspirational class. It is a clear example of why and how the idea of the West has been put to work outside the West.

Said's *Orientalism* encouraged us to imagine that the myth of the East reflects the West's total domination

of history. This perspective may recently have reached its apogee among exponents of the new field of 'Asian cultural studies'. 'Simply put', said Ravi Palat in 2002, 'Asia's unity derives from, and derives only from, its historical and contemporary role as Europe's civilizational other'. The point is put with equal assurance by Leo Ching (1998): Asia, he writes, 'is that which is excluded and objectified by the West in the service of its historical progress.' There is something suspiciously sweeping about such assessments. They are intended to be critiques of the West, yet they make it seem so omnipotent as to be beyond challenge.

More closely observed studies make it clear that Eastern debate on the West could be both creative and original. Even figures popular in the West, such as Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (awarded the Nobel



Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet whose critique of the West formed part of the Bengali debate about modernity.

Prize for literature in 1913 and a knighthood in 1915), can be used to substantiate this argument. The advocate of spiritual Asia, Tagore's (1861-1941) reputation has suffered at the hands of those who cast him as re-heating the orientalist fantasies of Western colonialists. Tagore's friend, the Bengali historian Dinesh Chandra Sen, wrote that 'Bengal has not given Rabindranath to Europe – rather Europe has given him to the Bengalis'. There was some truth to this. The way Tagore was feted in the West says more about the West than anywhere else: the Tagore championed by W.B. Yeats was a strange other-worldly creature: 'Mr Tagore, like the Indian civilization itself,' gushed Yeats in 1912, 'has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to spontaneity'.

Yet, to understand Tagore's ideas of the West we must place him within a tradition of Bengali intellectuals from the late eighteenth century on, from the 'Father of Modern India' Rammohan Roy to the Hindu missionary Swami Vivekananada. Here he was neither a product of, nor footnote to, European power.

Tagore was cynical about Western claims on modernity and progress. He had a negative image of the West smothered with a 'spirit of repression and coercion', in order to give shape to a vision of an Asian modernity in which personal freedom and spiritual growth are as important as scientific and technical advance. 'Western man' was, for Tagore, 'professional man', a walking cliché, who 'carries a rigid crust around him which has little variation and hardly any elasticity'.

Fukuzawa and Tagore had different uses for the West, but both devised images of it to articulate their own political aspirations. They illustrate how debates about the meaning and nature of the West flourished outside it. These debates were not 'responses' to a pre-formed entity, but moments in its genesis.

These visions of progress needed self-conscious populations, and they used the idea of the West to map out pathways through distinctive forms of modernity. Whether or not we approve of these routes, it is increasingly necessary to ask 'whose West, whose modernity?'. Modernity is not the exclusive property of the West; it emerged in numerous places rather than just one. As Western nations seal up their borders for fear of what 'they' may think about 'us', occidentalism becomes an unavoidable site of controversy and enquiry.

Alastair Bonnett's book *The Idea of the West: History, Politics and Culture* is published by Palgrave (2004).

THE V+A EXHIBITION 'Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800' runs from September 23rd to December 5th, 2004. Advance booking is strongly recommended: call 0870 906 3883. For details visit: www.vam.ac.uk.