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# Introduction

## LOOKING TO THE EAST

The people of our western hemisphere, in all these discoveries, gave proofs of a great superiority of genius and courage over the eastern nations. We have settled ourselves amongst them, and frequently in spite of their resistance. We have learned their languages, and have taught them some of our arts; but nature hath given them one advantage which overbalances all ours; which is, that they do not want us, but we them.

—Voltaire (1694–1778), *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations  
et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis  
Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII*<sup>1</sup>

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the world is taking back many of the outcomes of the nineteenth. The nineteenth century witnessed the culmination of a historically unparalleled process by which Europeans came to assert their dominance over four continents. One of the consequences was an attitude of arrogant condescension towards all civilizations that had given proof of their deficiency, if not terminal debility, through the ease with which they had been militarily overpowered, economically exploited, and technologically outstripped. The “West”—the European great powers, Britain at the fore, together with a United States of America that increasingly hankered after an empire of its own—savored its triumph over Asia, in particular. It had long been taken for granted that indigenous Americans, black Africans, and the

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natives of Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific islands could be subdued, dispossessed, colonized, and if necessary slaughtered in great numbers. Ever since Europeans had first learned of their existence, a sense of their own superiority to these “savages” (as they had been called since ancient times) had gone almost unquestioned.

Asia, by contrast, had always been the great counterweight to Europe, a world of mighty empires and prosperous societies, glorious cultural achievements and venerable religions. For thousands of years, the Eurasian continent had formed a single interconnected field. The emergence and spread of agriculture had already been a process of pan-Eurasian diffusion. Time and again, Asiatic peoples had intervened in the history of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean and to the north of it, assimilating the vast spaces of Russia into their equestrian empires. Although Asia Minor and the Levant had been incorporated into the Imperium Romanum, the norm until well into the early modern period was for Europe to be threatened by Asia, not the other way around. Parthians, Huns, Arabs, Mongols, and Turks had all attacked the Western and Eastern Roman Empires and their various successor states, in some cases maintaining political control over previously Christianized regions for many centuries. Even Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a vigilant and sober observer of contemporary world politics, feared a renewed Mongol onslaught, perhaps recalling Crimean Tatar raids on Transylvania and Moravia between 1657 and 1666.<sup>2</sup> “And if these Tatars were not constantly fighting each other,” he wrote in a letter in April 1699, “they might be able to inundate large parts of the world, just as they once did under Genghis Khan.”<sup>3</sup>

### ASIA'S “DECLINE”—EUROPE'S ARROGANCE

Compared with Leibniz's sincere concerns, which admittedly were grossly exaggerated even at the time, the warnings of late nineteenth-century authors about an alleged “yellow peril” were little more than fearmongering propaganda. By then, Asia's political power seemed to have been bro-

ken once and for all, its cultural prestige reduced to a shadow of its former glory. Around 1900, at the zenith of high imperialism, most of Asia was under European colonial rule. Only the boldest of prophets would have predicted an end to this dispensation. Although semicolonial states like China, Siam (later Thailand), or the Ottoman Empire had managed to preserve their territorial integrity, their sovereignty had been drastically curtailed. Only Japan had succeeded through a tremendous effort of will, and under the most favorable external conditions imaginable, in transforming itself from a victim of the European powers and the USA into their junior partner, modernizing at breakneck speed. Everywhere else in Asia, the economic forms of European capitalism had triumphed, predominantly under the aegis of foreigners; only in rare cases had they been appropriated by native forces. All Asia seemed to have lost the historical initiative and been left far behind in the race to modernize. It was no zealous advocate of imperialism but the levelheaded Austrian economist Friedrich von Wieser, who in 1909 gave voice to the general European verdict:

Asia, the cradle of the human race, is buried under the rubble of enfeebled, degraded nations, which are no longer capable of grasping the opportunities for growth offered them by the technical advances of the age.<sup>4</sup>

In short, history seemed to have passed by Asia and the Asians.

Hardly anyone in Europe would have dared or cared to contest this verdict in the years leading up to the First World War, and few did so in the following decades. A first sign of renewed vitality at Europe's gates was Kemal Atatürk's energetic and successful modernization policy in Turkey, initiated in 1923. Yet it was not until the 1940s that Asia was able to wrest back its historical agency in the eyes of the world: with the Japanese attack on the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the surrender of the supposedly impregnable British fortress of Singapore barely two months later, with the Vietnamese revolution in 1945 and the Chinese in 1949, and with the independence

of the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, and Indonesia between 1946 and 1949.

During the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in its final quarter, the causes and occasions for European arrogance towards Asia vanished in the face of the extraordinarily dynamic economic growth experienced by several of the continent's regions. For all those millions elsewhere who continued to languish in poverty, a majority of citizens of those economic powerhouses were now able to enjoy decent standards of living. The last rearguard argument used to defend European exceptionalism—Asians were capable merely of imitating the achievements of others, not of creative achievement in their own right—forfeited whatever credibility it might once have possessed. On the Asian side, there emerged an indigenous cultural nationalism that self-consciously rejected Western tutelage, asserted its own “Asian values,” repudiated all forms of “cultural imperialism,” and even turned on its head the old European cliché of Asia's terminal decadence by prophesying a decline of the West. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, this ideological campaign became a factor of global political importance. In the early 1990s, and in more subdued tones following the great Asian economic crisis of 1997, voices from Japan and China, from Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea could be heard proclaiming the superiority of their own cultural values and social institutions over those of the West. Western warnings about Islamist aggression and a “new yellow peril” were seen to be confirmed, and alarmist visions of an imminent “clash of civilizations” were not lacking.<sup>5</sup>

In the early twenty-first century, precious little thus remains of *fin de siècle* European hubris. Today it is impossible for Europe to recover its global supremacy, its unchallenged control over processes of economic globalization, and its pretensions to cultural superiority. If the nineteenth century belonged to Europe and the twentieth to the USA, many pundits of today are heralding the twenty-first as the Asian century. The time is ripe for historians to inquire into the origins of European exceptionalism, a vision of the world that for so long, and with such powerful reper-

cussions, asserted European primacy over all other civilizations. This vision drew on ancient and Christian antecedents before crystallizing, in the Age of Enlightenment, into a secular worldview that dispensed with the religious belief in divine election. In the nineteenth century, increasingly discolored by racism, it dictated how Europeans presented themselves abroad before subsiding, in the era of decolonization, into an attitude of smug intellectual condescension.

Returning to the era of its formation, the eighteenth century, does not just mean trawling through the archives to illustrate an argument about the rise and fall of a historical discourse—in this case, that of European exceptionalism—and thus adding to the sometimes overdrawn, denunciatory critiques of European hypocrisies, illusions, and officially sanctioned delusions that have flourished ever since the publication in 1978 of Edward W. Said's highly influential polemic, *Orientalism*. It also means exploring a cultural world that no single thesis can exhaust: the world of European interest in Asia in the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>6</sup>

## THE GREAT MAP OF MANKIND

The European intellectual climate in the Age of Enlightenment was cosmopolitan in outlook, even when individual writers did not explicitly subscribe to a cosmopolitan agenda or philosophy.<sup>7</sup> National borders played a less important role than in earlier and, especially, later periods.<sup>8</sup> The eighteenth-century republic of letters was multilingual. Latin was no longer predominant yet was still widely understood. Densely woven networks of communication, maintained through correspondence, visits, and foreign employment, connected savants in Paris and Edinburgh, London and Saint Petersburg, Uppsala and Göttingen, Leiden and Turin.<sup>9</sup> Leibniz and Voltaire sought out like-minded contacts in far-off civilizations who could help them in their great project of adding to the store of knowledge about the world. For a time the Chinese mandarins, a meritocratic elite, seemed ideal interlocutors. Enlightenment was conceived as a universal enterprise.

It has become clearer today than even a few decades ago that this enterprise was equally a polycentric one. The peripheries of Europe did not just reflect the light beamed out from Paris and a handful of other metropolises; “epicenters of reason” were scattered throughout the continent.<sup>10</sup> The British colonies in North America assume central importance in a global view of Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were among the key *philosophes* of the age. Impulses emanating from Europe were taken up and creatively reworked in Lima, Calcutta, Batavia, and Cape Town. In the 1780s the Asiatick Society of Bengal, steered by the brilliant jurist, linguist, and *homme de lettres* Sir William Jones, formed one of the most dynamic clusters of transcultural scholarship found anywhere in the world at the time.<sup>11</sup> The Jesuit missionaries at the imperial court of China, some of whom stayed on after the suppression of their order in Europe in the 1760s, remained what their predecessors had already been in Leibniz’s day: valued epistolary partners for the leading European intellectuals.

Through such channels, which in many respects anticipate the dense networks of our own time, knowledge about political and social conditions, mores, customs, and religions in the non-European world was imported into Europe. Like other forms of knowledge, it underwent the procedures identified by Peter Burke: professing, establishing, locating, classifying, controlling, selling, acquiring, trusting, distrusting.<sup>12</sup> In Europe, knowledge about Asia was classified, evaluated, and archived; foreign objects were itemized, catalogued, and put on display.<sup>13</sup> Botany and zoology benefited from the specimens yielded by expeditions and colonial collections. The variety of species in nature was literally and figuratively first brought home to Europeans with increasing knowledge of the tropics; indigenous taxonomies flowed into many of the systems that European scientists now set about developing. Eighteenth-century intellectuals and scholars processed a constant flow of data from all around the world. Knowledge cultures cross-fertilized over vast distances.<sup>14</sup> The European Enlightenment opened outwards to the rest of the world and in turn had an impact far beyond the boundaries of continental Europe.

The interest of an educated public in reports from Asia, America, the Pacific, and Africa was stronger than ever before. It was met by a veritable flood of travel literature. The standard travel works of the time crowded the shelves of almost every scholarly library and princely collection.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the Jesuits, some even made it as far as China.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the era, the enormous private library of the Berlin geographer Carl Ritter contained almost the complete European-language literature on the world beyond Europe's borders.<sup>17</sup> Public interest in events in the Ottoman Empire, for example, was so great that in 1789 the geographer Johann Traugott Plant brought out a weighty lexicon on Turkey for the edification of information-hungry newspaper readers.<sup>18</sup> The horizon of the generation that began to write and publish in the mid-eighteenth century spanned the entire globe. This was without precedent in European intellectual history. In 1777 the parliamentary, political philosopher, and—as we will see—morally concerned commentator on India, Edmund Burke, wrote to William Robinson to convey his grateful “pleasure” on reading his *History of America*, one of the historiographical masterpieces of the epoch:

The part which I read with the greatest pleasure is the discussion of the Manners and character of the Inhabitants of that new World. I have always thought with you, that we possess at this time very great advantages towards the knowledge of human Nature. We need no longer to go to History to trace it in all its stages and periods. . . . But now the Great Map of Mankind is unrolld at once; and there is no state or Gradation of barbarism, and no mode of refinement which we have not at the same instant under our View. The very different Civility of Europe and of China; The barbarism of Persia and Abyssinia. The erratick manners of Tartary, and of Arabia. The Savage State of North America, and of New Zealand.<sup>19</sup>

Writing at the same time in a similar vein, Jean-Nicolas Démeunier formulated the following Rousseauian sentence in the introduction to his superb ethnographic encyclopedia, a work that systematically collated

knowledge about the customs and rites of every nation scattered on the face of the Earth: “We know nearly all the nations, civilized [*policées*] and savage; now the time has come to compare them.”<sup>20</sup> And the Scottish social philosopher Adam Ferguson was able to draw on material from all epochs and cultures when preparing his treatise on universal sociology, first published in 1767. “Late discoveries,” he declared even before he could profit from Captain Cook’s voyages in the Pacific, “have brought us to the knowledge of almost every situation in which mankind are placed.”<sup>21</sup>

At the time he wrote this, the East had long been present in more than just images and texts. Europeans could hardly bear to go without spices from the “East Indies”; they clothed themselves in Indian cotton and Chinese silk; they drank Arabian coffee and sipped Chinese tea.<sup>22</sup> Opium from Turkey and India stimulated the artificial paradises of romantic literature and became, at least in England, a mass-market drug.<sup>23</sup> In the eighteenth century Asia was a tangible, consumable presence in European everyday life. We have all seen porcelain from China, the author of a popular history of Asia addressed his readers in 1735, so why should we not study the country’s history as well?<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the potential for the high-performing economies of the East to threaten their Western rivals did not go unheeded. Around 1700, competition from China was already giving French producers headaches.

Between around 1750 and 1820 it seemed far more self-evident than at any time before, and indeed at any time since, that the scholarly and educated public in France and Great Britain, Germany and Italy should keep abreast of conditions and developments overseas. It was not primarily on account of its entertainment value that news from foreign lands was consumed so avidly. Along with the classics of the ancient world and the Bible (commonly read as a work of history), it served as raw material for an empirical science of humankind. This *science de l’homme* was supranational, transcultural, and—as Burke and Dêmeunier indicated—comparative in scope; authors from the most diverse scientific disciplines and from all over Europe contributed to it. Pierre Bayle, the first Enlightenment author of genuinely European stature, had already sought out

examples of human behavior from all four corners of the Earth. Countless others followed in his footsteps.

This global knowledge base collapsed in the nineteenth century—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it fragmented. For civilizations outside Europe, experts in the emerging field of oriental studies and in the likewise newly minted discipline of ethnology (or anthropology) were now the responsible authorities.<sup>25</sup> There they fraternized among themselves, leaving scholars in the most prestigious and influential disciplines of academic life to narrow their focus on Europe.<sup>26</sup> One example may serve to illustrate this trend. The leading historians of eighteenth-century Germany, such as August Ludwig Schlözer and Johann Christoph Gatterer at the University of Göttingen, had kept themselves as closely informed about the history of Asiatic nations as their sources of information permitted them to be, and they had been quite prepared to make space for these nations in their grand historical canvases. Leopold von Ranke, by contrast, the most distinguished German historian of the following century, confined his late, idiosyncratic *History of the World* (1881–88) to the peoples of classical antiquity and postclassical Europe, in his eyes the only ones that truly mattered in world-historical terms. Ranke, a man with a pan-European perspective, still showed an interest in the Ottoman Empire; indeed, in Germany he was regarded for that reason as something of an Orientalist.<sup>27</sup> Among the generation of his students, however, an obdurate Euro- or even Germanocentrism prevailed. Around the turn of the twentieth century, only the odd intellectual maverick such as Otto Hintze, Karl Lamprecht, Max Weber, or Kurt Breysig bucked the trend, drawing on the latest research in oriental studies to reconnect with the cosmopolitan outlook of the Enlightenment.

## THE POWER OF DISCOURSE, THE BURDEN OF LEARNING

Just how serious was the eighteenth century's cosmopolitanism, how genuine its interest in the non-European world? To what extent did these

writers strive to attain an adequate understanding of “the others”? Is this not rather a Eurocentrism in exotic dress, perhaps even the vain illusion of a class of overly ambitious European intellectuals trying on a fashionable mantle of urbanity? Did European observers ever really escape from a hall of self-reflecting mirrors? Did they not simply see what they *wanted* to see? Such questions touch on more than just the problem of subjective effort and personal honesty. These are fundamental questions concerning the social and cultural conditions of knowledge, the epistemological possibilities for people of a particular civilization to form an adequate image of members of another civilization. The literature on this topic tends to skeptical judgments. They appear in two versions.<sup>28</sup>

The first could be called the *model of autistic discourse*. Edward W. Said and many of his followers attributed a blindness to European culture in the age of imperial expansion, an incapacity to enter into dialogue with other cultures, which at best came into question as mute objects of political control and scientific analysis. Said was always cautious enough to confine such a suspicion of blanket ideology to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For good reasons, he identified Bonaparte’s Egyptian expedition of 1798 as the Big Bang of a form of thought he dubbed “Orientalism.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the great provocation of this kind of discourse analysis lies in its critique of the objectivist self-understanding of oriental studies in nineteenth-century Europe, its unmasking of the tension between the discipline’s claims to truth and its unspoken imperial preconditions.<sup>30</sup>

These preconditions were still largely absent in the eighteenth century. Europeans ventured into Asia more as missionaries, traveling scholars, diplomats, and armed merchants than as colonial overlords. At the time of the French Revolution, European colonies were slivers lodged in the flanks of far-mightier Asiatic kingdoms and empires: minor irritants, perhaps, but hardly threats to their existence. Europe and Asia still maintained a precarious balance of power. It tipped over in the period between the assertion of British overlordship in India in 1818 and the forced opening of the Japanese archipelago in 1853/54. The scholarly world of the

European ancien régime had no need of the nineteenth century's imperial trappings. The nexus between knowledge and power was already established in the state-sponsored research and discovery expeditions mounted by the British, French, and Russians, but it was nowhere near as close as in the full-blown colonialism of the decades around 1900. In eighteenth-century Asia, the historical preconditions for applying the "postcolonial" model of autistic discourse were present only in rudimentary fashion.

This model primarily emerged from a theory-internal dynamic and was transformed with the impetus of that dynamic into a globally influential approach for investigating Europeans' perceptions of the non-European world. It reflected a general movement in the social sciences that drew attention to the "constructedness" of cultural phenomena and emphasized how what we call "reality" is always shaped by language (the so-called "linguistic turn"). What had previously appeared as the self-evident facticity of human lifeworlds was now decoded as a figment of the collective imagination. The attempt was made to show how supposedly age-old traditions expressing the romantic spirit of the people were in fact "invented traditions" of relatively recent origin. A nation was not a social fact, still less a biological one, but an "imagined community." Concepts that had hitherto been applied in blithe self-confidence to Asia now stood revealed, under the mistrustful, clinical gaze of critical inquiry, as the creations of Western science: neither the idea of a caste *system* nor the notion of Hinduism as a homogeneous, theologically systematic "world religion" (akin to Christianity or Islam) is known to authentic Indian thought, for example. They are essentially Western "inventions."<sup>31</sup> Much the same could be said of the geographical and cultural construct "Asia." Whether such findings directly invalidate these concepts and theorems is another question. Many of them have proven their usefulness as tools of scientific description and explanation.

It is the merit of postcolonialism and the affiliated method of discourse analysis to have sown doubt about descriptions made by *others*. This distrust, however, does not authorize the opposite conclusion that

*self*-descriptions are always and under all conditions more authentic and hence more truthful. Yet to assume the a priori “inauthenticity” of *all* statements that make intentional reference to reality goes too far. On this account, “scientific” statements that purport to say something about the real world only shed light on themselves and their authors. With that, any criteria for correctness and truth fall away.

Under such premises, historical texts about foreign cultures are studied only for the rhetorical strategies and semantic procedures by which text-immanent foreignness or difference (“alterity”) is produced. It is no longer asked to what extent specific representations are true to the reality they seek to represent. As little interest is shown in the criteria by which information was once found noteworthy. For example, that the author of a travel report from 1760 was firmly convinced he was observing and reporting what he observed with strict accuracy and impartiality, and that his readers judged him by the same criteria: this is a historical fact that can hardly be ignored. The model of autistic discourse alleges the fictitious, figmentary nature of all representations of foreign cultural and social conditions. Every utterance made by a European about non-European civilizations then appears as a pure phantasm, valuable for what it reveals about European mentalities but unrelated to any external cultural reality. The history of ideas neglects its hermeneutic task of tracking down past meanings when it embraces this model. It becomes instead an exercise in politically motivated denunciation, far more than any reductionist critique of ideology in the Marxist tradition.

The second, more conventional, and less theoretically ambitious type of argumentation could be termed the *model of disillusioned humanism*. It tends in the same direction. Advocates of this model likewise doubt whether the much-lauded cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment ever involved a genuine openness towards foreign cultures. Unlike the model of autistic discourse developed by Said from the ideas of Michel Foucault, however, the model of disillusioned humanism does not rule out the possibility that Europeans could arrive at an adequate understanding of non-European reality. It presupposes that every culture contains a reser-

voir of meaning that, given sufficient attention and interpretive effort, could be accessed even by outsiders. Yet such transcultural understanding cannot, as the positivist oriental sciences of the nineteenth century maintained, be secured through methodology. Empathetic interpretation can succeed only under the most favorable conditions and thanks to the border-transcending artistry of extraordinarily gifted virtuosi. It is a near-impossible stroke of good fortune.

Guided by such assumptions, a group of historians who had studied European views of America came to the melancholy conclusion that not a single one of the European visitors who described America in the quarter of a millennium between 1500 and 1750 had succeeded unconditionally in meeting the cognitive challenges posed by this alien world. None had therefore created an *America*-centric view of America. Europe had never been “genuinely” interested in these newfound lands and cultures “for their own sake”; it had only been out to enrich itself materially and intellectually through its contact with them. European knowledge of American remained completely self-referential, and the great opportunity for a truly immersive encounter was squandered.<sup>32</sup> Egocentrism and a failure of intellectual nerve were not the only factors to blame for this; the ancient and Christian mental ballast that Europeans brought with them to the New World was equally at fault. The great project of a transcultural hermeneutics was doomed not by a *lack* of prior knowledge and understanding but by an *excess* of it.

While older scholarship had taken overseas travelers to task for their alleged ignorance, gullibility, and naivety, the new disillusioned humanism lamented the intellectual tyranny of the ancients over early modern observers of foreign climes. It was not because travelers failed to understand what they were seeing that the opportunity for a peaceful, mutually enriching cross-cultural encounter was passed up. Rather, forearmed with the ethnographic ideas of the ancients, the Aristotelian doctrine of slavery and an Augustinian theology, visitors were only too confident that they had understood everything there was to understand, whereas they were actually transferring prefabricated schemata onto their new

surroundings. On this view, the new was all-too-readily assimilated to the long familiar.<sup>33</sup> America—or Asia, to which such reflections could be adapted without difficulty—appears as a marginal episode in the history of the formation of the European mind.

This way of looking at things is also unsatisfactory. On the one hand, it measures historical statements against an impossibly high standard: that of an unblinkered, unbiased understanding of authentic foreignness. The reproach of “self-referentiality” targets the conditions of *all* understanding. Getting to know another culture from the inside out, a goal shared by a number of Enlightenment thinkers in their efforts to combat prejudice, turns out to be a chimera. Every hermeneutics presupposes that observers bring their own traditions and pre-judgments (or “prejudices”) to bear on what they observe; indeed, this first allows them to come to grips with what would otherwise seem unfathomably alien.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it is only to be expected that any semi-educated early modern European would perceive foreign civilizations through the prism of the knowledge and concepts he (or she, in the case of the female travelers to be examined later) had inherited from the ancients. In an era when higher education was based on the study of the Greek and Roman classics, European images of Asia could never be separated from contemporary images of the ancient world.<sup>35</sup>

But the ancients steadily came to forfeit their normative force over the course of the eighteenth century. The Comte de Boulainvilliers, an influential philosopher of the early French Enlightenment, declared the history of the Arabs to be as instructive as that of the Greeks and Romans.<sup>36</sup> Voltaire later took a similar view. The information about the world provided by the ancient authorities was quite insufficient, the Leipzig philologist Johann Christoph Adelung found in 1768; modern travel writers needed to be consulted.<sup>37</sup> Around 1790 the universal authority of Greco-Roman antiquity as a whole stood in question. The encounter with Asian civilizations had shaken it more effectively than the earlier one with the American wilderness and the “savages” who peopled it.

Both interpretive paradigms, the autistic discourse model and the model of disillusioned humanism, arrive at similar results via different paths. Whether perceived as the consequence of an inevitable, discursively homogenizing conspiracy between culture and imperialism<sup>38</sup> or as the product of an incapacity to break the shackles of tradition that inhibited intercultural understanding: European texts on America and Asia from the early modern period, it is claimed, testify to nothing short of an epistemological disaster. The study of texts lacking both truth-value and artistic merit can be justified, at best, by demonstrating how in each case non-European cultures were misrepresented, distorted, and disfigured in the age of European global conquest. Only in the “postcolonial” present, many adherents of both schools contend, has it become possible to get closer to the truth about “the other.”

If this kind of agnosticism were to have the final say on descriptions of foreignness in history, then there would be no point devoting any more time to them. Entire libraries of literature on America, Asia, and Africa would then consist of nothing but testaments to European folly and hubris that should best be consigned to oblivion. Are there alternatives?

The most obvious is just as unsatisfactory: returning to a precritical historiography that takes a constant expansion of the Europeans’ physical and mental horizons as the occasion to celebrate the modern West’s supposedly unique capacity for insight into other civilizations.<sup>39</sup> It is true that no other culture in the modern age surpassed the Europeans in their curiosity about faraway lands or created comparable sciences for studying and understanding foreign cultures.<sup>40</sup> Yet the resulting accumulation of knowledge cannot be isolated from the process of European imperial and colonial expansion. Knowledge of the Other and appropriation of what belonged to the Others went hand in hand. Moreover, standard historical accounts of the progressive European discovery of the world, fixated on the ever more precise measurement and cartographical representation of reality, operate with too narrow a conception of the history of science. Early modern texts on Asia appear only as forerunners to

modern oriental studies and ethnology. Sources are placed less in the contemporary context of their genesis than in a chronological sequence culminating in the current state of research. The primary interest in early modern travelers to Asia would then lie in what—by today's standards—they “already” saw correctly. Such an immanent history of knowledge accumulation is of limited usefulness. At best, it is applicable only to cartography, meticulous description of the natural world, and (with some reservations) linguistics.

## SENSING AND CONSTRUCTING DIFFERENCE

I want to venture down a different path in this book. What we casually refer to as “images” of Asia are accessed, above all, in texts. We work with texts for want of a better alternative. It is not because “culture” itself can be grasped as a text and the history of culture is therefore consummated in textual interpretation that we immerse ourselves in texts, but because there are no other sources at our disposal that so effectively convey how impressions and fantasies of foreignness are imported into native contexts of thinking and feeling. For historians, texts are the products of individual activity set against a societal framework. They are deeply rooted in human praxis. The genesis of texts claims our initial interest. Each individual text emerges from a field of experience and intention, perception and imagination, seeing and hearing, convention and innovation. The text itself is a relatively late product of complex processes. Chapters 3 to 7 deal with these processes by sketching a kind of logistics for producing images of foreignness. This involves travel and the accumulation of useful knowledge, the mobile observer's concrete encounters and interactions with his or her alien cultural environment, the scholarly world (which has its own interests and standards of judgment), and finally the literary market with its laws of valuation and competition.

European texts on Asia should thus not be read in isolation as static “representations” of reality. We should instead situate them in their always-specific contexts of social praxis, paying careful attention to how

they switch between real-world reference and fictionality, instruction and entertainment. Setting up the construction and depiction of foreign cultures as a mutually exclusive opposition, and hence interrogating texts *only* for their ideological content or *only* for their empirical accuracy, misrecognizes the shimmering multifacetedness of the great early modern accounts of Asia. That polyvalence is what constitutes their enduring appeal. They would hardly be worthy of our attention if they either merely mirrored European self-understandings or merely anticipated later and more reliable research findings. The texts discussed in this book are both at the same time: projections of the European imagination *and* attempts to grasp reality with the epistemic toolkit of the time.

A second level of contextualization is found where individual statements provide material for broader arguments. Asia functioned in multiple ways in European debates: debates about savagery and civilization, progress and decadence, governance and justice, the wealth and poverty of nations, the rights and happiness of women, truth and falsehood in religion. The second half of this book is taken up with several of these debates. Not everything could be covered: I lack the linguistic competence to give Asian languages the attention they deserve; and the topic of Asiatic religions is so vast that it would have threatened to overwhelm the book.<sup>41</sup> Less than a history of “images,” this book is a history of conceptualizations and their instruments: concepts and the overarching idioms or “languages” (in the sense given the term by the intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock) of which they form the components.<sup>42</sup>

The object of such conceptualizations were differences. What is remarkable about these differences is not the fact that they existed in the first place. To point out that Asia was Europe’s Other is a trivial observation. But what was the nature of these differences in the eyes of individual authors? How were they evaluated? How were comparisons made between individual Asiatic civilizations, which differed from Europe and each other in ever-specific ways? A thinking that operates with simple dichotomies, such as the binary opposition between “native” and “foreign,” impedes our understanding of how difference was perceived and

posited in a broad spectrum of gradations. “Foreignness” is not an unambiguous and absolute category but a relative and endlessly variable one. Every single statement in seventeenth- or eighteenth-century texts that establishes a link between Europe and Asia charts such cultural differences anew. The historian’s task is to reconstruct that process. To what end? In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europe defined itself in opposition to Asia. What is interesting is not *that* this happened but *how* it happened. The times when one could rest satisfied with the simple template of an “inverted world” were long past. Where was the *differentia specifica* between East and West located in each particular case? Was this difference appraised as a sign of superiority or inferiority? Could it be bridged, or was it viewed as natural and inalterable? What strategies were used to contain the discomfort or even terror that such difference could give rise to in the observer? Did European visitors seek to repudiate and exclude the foreign, or did they attempt to assimilate and incorporate it, to meet it halfway, to domesticate it through colonization and revoke its otherness through Westernizing reforms?<sup>43</sup> Whether the countless individual determinations of difference ultimately add up to a single discernible pattern and fit into a general history of shifts in European mentality is the most difficult question of all. The last chapter of the book will attempt an answer to it.

## SPACES

The fact that a broadly European perspective on Asia is adopted here, rather than a German, French, or English one, calls for a word of justification. National differences were certainly not insignificant. The British saw India, where they had growing colonial interests, differently from the Germans, whose lack of imperial power afforded them greater freedom of judgment. In the eighteenth century, however, such national nuances were contained within a pan-European, Enlightenment frame of reference. Even within Europe, intellectual lines of influence were often not drawn bilaterally: the image of England propagated by the Frenchman

Montesquieu had a major impact in Germany, perhaps more so than the British representation of themselves. Debates on Asia likewise played out on a pan-European level. Scholars of the time were multilingual. For those among their contemporaries who were not, the more substantial primary reports on Asiatic countries were soon translated into several languages.

Engelbert Kaempfer for example, who got to know Iran and Japan in the 1690s and wrote scholarly works on both countries that enjoyed an exceptionally high standing among the cognoscenti, was a Westphalian physician in the service of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC). His manuscript on Japan, composed in German (although usually he preferred writing in Latin), was acquired by the English collector and scientific administrator Sir Hans Sloane, brought to London, and presented to the public in 1727 in a fairly free translation by the young Swiss naturalist Johann Caspar Scheuchzer. The French translation of Scheuchzer's English text appeared two years later and was more widely read on the continent—including in Germany, where French was more readily understood than English at the time. Those who only read German had to make do with the back translation from the French (1749), until in 1777–79 Kaempfer's Westphalian compatriot Christian Wilhelm Dohm, later a high-ranking Prussian civil servant and diplomat, finally published the original in two volumes.<sup>44</sup> Dohm smoothed the rough edges of Kaempfer's manuscript and adapted his Baroque German to the sensibilities of the age of Lessing. A critical edition did not see the light of day until 2001.<sup>45</sup>

In the eighteenth-century literary market, so complicated an editorial history was far from unique. This prompts us to ask what was specifically “German” about Engelbert Kaempfer's biography—he had been trained in Danzig (Gdańsk), Thorn (Toruń), Cracow (Kraków), Königsberg (Kaliningrad), and Uppsala<sup>46</sup>—and his public impact. These were far more typical of a Europe-wide republic of letters.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, it makes little sense to claim that the reports on China compiled by the French Jesuits, members of a self-consciously cosmopolitan elite, purvey

a specifically French view of China, or that the books written in English by the Swiss-born, German-educated Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, whose travels in the Middle East were sponsored by the British African Association, represent a characteristically Swiss perspective.<sup>48</sup> An overview of the French-, English-, and German-language literature on Asia, at the very least, is therefore called for. Much else appeared in Dutch, Italian, and Russian as well, while Spanish and Portuguese reports played only a marginal role in the eighteenth century.

On the other side, what is meant by “Asia”? It cannot be emphasized enough that “Asia,” understood as an umbrella term, was and essentially still is a European idea. In the eighteenth century the individual peoples of Asia did not identify themselves as “Asians”; they felt no solidarity transcending ethnic and religious borders; their elites saw no common path of historical development; nobody spelled out visions of a shared Asian destiny. Societies on the Asian continent were considerably more heterogeneous than their contemporary European counterparts. Whereas a similar political model could be found almost everywhere in Europe, a more or less “absolute” monarchy based on a hereditary aristocracy, the spectrum of systems of government was far wider in Asia. Above all, the bond of a common religion, which still loosely linked together Roman Catholic and Protestant Europe even after the interconfessional conflict of the Thirty Years’ War, was lacking in Asia. The European discourse on Asia was therefore unmatched by an Asian discourse about itself.<sup>49</sup>

This discourse operated on three levels: national, local, and continental. First, travelers wrote about clearly defined political entities (China, the Ottoman Empire, the Mughal Empire in India, etc.) or clearly identifiable countries in the modern sense (Persia, Japan, Siam/Thailand, etc.). At a deeper level of generalization, individual ethnicities, cities, or landscapes were discussed. This was the eyewitness point of view: it was possible to see the street life of Peking with one’s own eyes, but not “China” as such. Yet the local perspective by no means entailed just a naïve close-up account. The more one already knew (or thought one knew) about a country, the greater was the expectation that travelers pay particular

attention to local and regional variations. Thus Carsten Niebuhr, the German-Danish traveler to the Orient, informs a public always eager to learn about foreign judicial customs that “homicide is not even punished in the same way in the small domains of the Imam of Yemen, let alone throughout all Arabia.”<sup>50</sup> This tendency to ever-greater detail culminated in the extremely thorough “local surveys” carried out by the British in their newly conquered Indian territories from the late eighteenth century onwards.<sup>51</sup>

Over both these levels, the national and the local, floated a *continental* mode of commentary, concerned with comparing the various Asiatic countries and civilizations and with making generalizations about “Asia” and “Asians,” the “Orient” and “the Orientals.” Statements of such ultimate abstraction were by no means confined to armchair philosophers. On the frequent occasions when a traveler describes a scene or a behavior as “typically Asiatic,” the continental mode of commentary comes into play. All three levels are almost always combined in the era’s richer texts. If one wants to capture them all, then “Asia” must be viewed in the all-encompassing sense given the term by contemporaries.<sup>52</sup> While limiting coverage to “Monsoon Asia,”<sup>53</sup> for example, might make for a more streamlined presentation, it would fail to do justice to the perspective of the European eighteenth century. Even K. N. Chaudhuri’s comprehensive concept of the “four Indian Ocean civilizations” (Arabo-Persian Islam, India, Southeast Asia, China)<sup>54</sup> is too narrow for my purposes since it still excludes Mediterranean Islam, the Asiatic parts of the tsarist empire, and much of the rest of Central Asia. The Enlightenment’s “Asia” encompassed all these vast spaces. That is why I also consider what is today called the Muslim “Near East,” extending all the way north to the Ottoman-controlled Balkans and as far west as Egypt or even Morocco. Egypt, in particular, was regarded as an outpost of the Asiatic ecumene just as much as it belonged to North Africa. Edward Gibbon pointed out that the land on the Nile “is accessible only on the side of Asia, whose revolutions, in almost every period of history, Egypt has humbly obeyed.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, might not the Chinese civilization, as some speculated,

have originated in Egypt?<sup>56</sup> In the course of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was increasingly perceived as an “Asiatic,” non-European power. Those who spoke of “Asiatics” at the end of the eighteenth century almost always meant Turks, Arabs, and Iranians in addition to Tibetans and Mongols. Even the contemporary metageographical category of “the Asia-Pacific” is sometimes anticipated by eighteenth-century authors. However, given the profusion and excellence of recent literature on the Pacific in the age of Captain Cook and on the European debates about blissful and tragic Tahiti, I will mention the South Seas only in passing.<sup>57</sup>

## EPOCHS

The eighteenth century covered in this book is not limited to the years between 1700 and 1799. It is a “long” century, extending from around 1680 to 1830,<sup>58</sup> even the French Revolution, which got underway in 1789, does not provide a convincing end point.<sup>59</sup> Attentiveness to European interpretations of Asia highlights continuities in a period that is usually categorized with labels such as “idealism,” “romanticism,” or “utilitarianism.” Criteria supplied by the history of ideas and periodization conventions need to be tied to the real historical rhythms of European-Asiatic relations.

So far as the starting date is concerned, a convergence is not hard to ascertain. Historians of the European Enlightenment are largely agreed that Enlightenment philosophers (Bayle, Fontenelle, Locke) began making concerted and sustained contributions to public debate in the 1680s.<sup>60</sup> Around the same time, a new type of traveling observer enters the scene: the scientifically well-versed man of science or gentleman, drawn overseas less by a love of adventure and commercial enterprise than by a thirst for knowledge, missionary zeal, or diplomatic objectives.<sup>61</sup> The years between 1680 and around 1730 represent the heroic age of Asian travel. Sophisticated empirical accounts of almost all the countries on the continent appeared around this time, claiming canonical status until well

into the nineteenth century. Such travelogues fueled the popular craze for the exotic characteristic of the Baroque and the Rococo. In France, to name one prominent example, there was a vogue for all things oriental, beginning with Racine's tragedy *Bajazet* (1672) and reaching a climax with Antoine Galland's translation of the *Tales from the 1001 Nights* (1704–17).<sup>62</sup> French Jesuits reported from China from the mid-1680s, addressing and reaching an even-wider public than their already successful predecessors. The information they sent back contributed to the artistic and commercial flourishing of chinoiserie from the 1730s onwards.<sup>63</sup>

An important Asian country like Siam was first brought to European attention from the 1680s. The work *Du Royaume de Siam* (1691) by the French diplomat Simon de La Loubère was widely praised and imitated as a model eyewitness account. Its only serious rival was Jean Chardin's report on Iran (published in fragments in 1686 and in full in 1711), one of the most significant travel works of the modern age. India under the Mughals was described in the *Voyages* of the indefatigable overland traveler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, first published in 1676 and subsequently reissued many times. A little later, the political system and social life of the Ottoman Empire was presented with unprecedented thoroughness by Sir Paul Rycaut, who had served from 1667 to 1678 as English consul in Smyrna (Izmir). From this time on, the relative importance of Dutch literature on Asia suffered a marked decline.<sup>64</sup> French, English, and gradually also German became the leading languages for writing about Asia.

This quantum leap in reporting on Asia was accompanied by important developments on the ground.<sup>65</sup> The end of the century initiated something like a “belated early modern age” for Asia. In the 1680s the Kangxi emperor, who maintained as splendid a court as his contemporary Louis XIV and was easily the more accomplished statesman, completed the internal pacification of China by the new Qing dynasty, putting an end to decades of political turbulence following the Manchu conquest of the Dragon Throne in 1644. For more than a century to come, the Qing Empire would enjoy unchallenged predominance as something like a Eurasian superpower, economically all but self-sufficient, culturally

self-assured, and untroubled by the machinations of European imperialists.<sup>66</sup> In Japan the shoguns of the Tokugawa dynasty had expelled Catholic missionaries or had them martyred at the beginning of the seventeenth century and brutally suppressed native Christianity. A policy of isolationism (*sakoku*) was rigorously enforced from 1639: foreigners were forbidden from remaining in the country, and the Japanese from leaving it. Only the Dutch, who had supplied the Prince of Hirado with naval artillery in 1638 to help him put down the Shimabara rebellion, a desperate uprising by Japanese Catholics,<sup>67</sup> were permitted to continue trading under extremely restrictive conditions. On Dejima, an artificial island built in the bay of Nagasaki, VOC representatives were placed under virtual house arrest to keep them segregated from the local community. Contact was limited to the special police branch for resident aliens, state-appointed interpreters, and prostitutes.<sup>68</sup> Japan surpassed even China in its internal stability, external sovereignty, and economic dynamism. Despite economic and ecological problems that began to mount from around 1710 in Japan, and from midcentury in China,<sup>69</sup> both countries were far from lagging behind a preindustrial Europe.

For all of Southeast Asia, as for China, the 1680s marked the threshold to a new era, albeit one in which things generally took a turn for the worse.<sup>70</sup> On Java, the VOC had by 1682 succeeded in subduing their native opponents from their headquarters in Batavia, today's Jakarta.<sup>71</sup> Most of the fertile and populous island now stood under Dutch control, although the colonial administration remained patchy and weak throughout the eighteenth century. In 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution in England, Siam was rocked by a political upheaval that attracted keen interest in Europe as the "Siamese Revolution." Immediately after the death of the outward-looking King Narai, whom Louis XIV had courted in a series of diplomatic missions as a possible global partner for France, xenophobic counterforces overthrew Narai's prime minister Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek married to a Japanese Christian who maintained a European lifestyle and consorted with French priests and English merchants.<sup>72</sup> Siam proceeded to shut itself off from the rest of the world—not as strictly as

Japan, to be sure, yet still comprehensively enough to disqualify itself as a promising target for missionary work and trade.

Not even the most clear-sighted observers were aware that the mighty Mughal Empire had by the 1690s—perhaps, even more precisely, by 1689<sup>73</sup>—passed the peak of its power. The death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, however, revealed fatal weaknesses in an imperial organization that was far less secure than that of China, its great neighbor to the north. The Mughal Empire crumbled and collapsed within a few years; its core territories lingered on as a middling Indian power, but the empire was a shadow of its former self. These dramatic events rapidly transformed the political map of South Asia, but they did not leave the way clear for the English to impose colonial rule; the British did not control any Indian territorial states until the 1760s. Initially, native political forces were strengthened as the comprehensive Muslim empire of the Mughals evolved into a polycentric, multistate system. The downfall of the Islamic-Shi'ite Safavid dynasty in Iran followed with comparable speed. It reached its drastic conclusion when an invasion of Afghan tribes toppled the legitimate monarch in 1722, ushering in a protracted period of chaos and usurpation. Europeans could derive neither political nor commercial advantage from all this.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, the third of the early modern Islamic “gunpowder empires,”<sup>75</sup> the Ottoman Empire, asserted itself incomparably more effectively than the younger Islamic empires of the time. It had been the preeminent political factor in the Eastern Mediterranean since the conquest of Constantinople in 1453; in the sixteenth century it was even the strongest military power in the world. Its decline from such heights has been much debated and discussed. A comparison with India and Iran, and later with the swift erosion of the Spanish global empire, shows just how slowly and steadily that decline proceeded. At the end of the seventeenth century the Ottoman Empire was still a great power, even if it was no longer the terror of Christendom. The failed conquest of Vienna in 1683 broke the expansionary momentum of the once-invincible Ottoman military machine. Under the terms of the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) the sultan was forced to

cede Hungary, initiating the process by which the Christian powers gradually pushed the Ottomans out of continental Europe. The mood quickly shifted in Christian Europe. The old image of the “devil Turk” was now complemented by the bumbling Turkish buffoon, a type immortalized in the harem overseer Osmin from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s opera, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782).

There is thus much to suggest that the years after 1680 marked a time of transition in Asiatic history and a key period in relations between Europe and Asia, even if not all individual lines of development pointed in the same direction. It would be far too simplistic—as well as an anachronistic retrojection of later events—to see here the onset of an inevitable decline of Asia and rise of Europe. Decline was far from people’s minds in China; on the contrary, the empire was only just entering the lengthy period of peace and prosperity known as the “High Qing.” Japan consolidated the gains it had made in the seventeenth century and slowly created the conditions for its eventual modernization in the second half of the nineteenth century. Where civil war and systemic collapse afflicted Asiatic states, Europeans often saw little benefit: trade suffered, yet military intervention and the imposition of colonial rule would have been prohibitively expensive. Economically and politically, the eighteenth century was a time of fluctuating equilibrium between Europe and Asia.

Real power relations can be gauged with some accuracy from the situations faced by travelers on the ground. It is one of this book’s fundamental arguments that many eighteenth-century European travelers to Asia—to the extent that they offered public accounts of their travels—were neither passively registering what they had experienced and witnessed nor telling tall stories in the manner of many an earlier fabulist. They constituted instead a class of roving *philosophes*, itinerant scholars who combined high competence with great intellectual authority. Under imperial conditions, such people would have been shielded from danger by the relevant colonial power. Apart from the tsarist empire and a few areas in India and Southeast Asia, however, this was nowhere the case in

eighteenth-century Asia. James Cook and other maritime explorers brought their own defenses with them and were practically invulnerable to attack so long as they stayed on board their ships. Travel was impossible or life-threatening elsewhere. The Chinese interior remained off-limits, while in Japan every move made by Europeans was closely monitored by the state. The imperial and colonial character of the eighteenth century should therefore not be overstated, particularly in Asia. Data was collected and observations made by Europeans traveling outside the asymmetrical framework of imperial structures in West Asia and Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Burma, Vietnam, Siam, China, and Japan.

The balance of power between Asia and Europe was matched by an intellectual equilibrium that makes the thinking of this era far more attractive and lastingly significant than later triumphalist ideologies of the all-conquering West. The British historians G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter put it this way:

It was also a moment when, because of the power of Enlightenment pens, Europe itself was sufficiently self-critical and free from bigotry to be able to confront other cultures, admittedly not as equals, nor even necessarily on their own terms, but at least as alternative versions of living—for a brief moment before the logic of the white man's mission required they be subordinated, eviscerated and destroyed.<sup>76</sup>

This equilibrium broke down over the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Early industrialization in Europe now caused the economic scales to turn against countries of the later Third World. At the same time, Europe confronted other civilizations with newfound aggressiveness. The British completed their conquest of India and gave their colonial state a form that would endure for over a century. On Java, the second bridgehead of early Asian colonization, the unusually bloody anti-Dutch rebellion of 1825–30 marked the transition to a new form of colonialism that interfered far more directly with native society.<sup>77</sup> The Greek war of liberation, beginning in 1821, was no longer waged purely in terms

of power politics, as had still been the case for the Russo-Ottoman wars of the eighteenth century. Anti-Turkish propaganda stylized the conflict as a struggle between a freedom-loving West and oriental barbarism; this presupposed that since the 1770s a previously overlooked resemblance, or even historical continuity, had been discovered between the ancient and the modern Greeks.<sup>78</sup> Likewise in the 1820s the Qing Empire started to be destabilized by the contraband trade in opium from India. The resulting Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839–42 rudely stripped China of its remaining mystique. Within the multiethnic tsarist empire, as historian Andreas Kappeler remarks, there emerged at the same time “a pejorative way of distinguishing between the state people, the Russians, who were now in the grip of nationalism, and strangers who belonged to another ‘rod,’ a foreign clan, lifestyle, and perhaps even race.”<sup>79</sup> Again at the same time and in a parallel historical development, the Indian tribes in North America were forcibly deprived of whatever was left of their political agency and even autonomy.

In the period between around 1800 and 1830, the discourse on Asia also underwent changes that amounted to a break with the intellectual past. Older conventions and attitudes persisted into the new century in the literature on non-European nations and civilizations, at least for a time. Alexander von Humboldt’s great American travel work, which began appearing in 1805, brought the Enlightenment tradition of encyclopedic coverage of foreign cultures by traveling generalists to a crowning conclusion.<sup>80</sup> In 1818–20 the public was presented with a comprehensive synthesis of all the information that the Jesuits had collected on China since the early seventeenth century.<sup>81</sup> It reads like a memorial to a bygone era. The specialization and professionalization of expertise on Asia now gathered pace. In 1822, the year the Egyptian hieroglyphs were deciphered by Jean-François Champollion, the *Société Asiatique* was established in Paris. The Royal Asiatic Society was founded in London in 1823, followed in 1845 by the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* (German Oriental Society), an association of German-speaking Orientalists that initially worked in close partnership with classical philologists.<sup>82</sup>

The professionalization of knowledge about Asia was accompanied by its marginalization in the nineteenth-century education system. Asia suffered a loss of prestige in European eyes. By 1830 the process was complete. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel struck the new tone in his 1822 Berlin lectures on the philosophy of world history when he confined the world-historical importance of Asiatic civilizations to their distant past. The enthusiasm for a Persian, Indian, or Chinese education—conceived as a supplement or even alternative to the traditional grounding in the classics—that had gripped some in the two decades around 1800 also dissipated around this time. Greek, not Sanskrit or Persian, continued to be taught in German Gymnasiums and English public schools, and Goethe's late endorsement of "world literature" met with little support in the long run.<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Rückert, the poet and great translator, displayed all the arrogance of the professional Orientalist when he ridiculed the amateur Goethe:

Als der West war durchgekostet,  
hat er jetzt den Ost entmostet.<sup>84</sup>

Having drunk his fill of the West  
He has now uncorked the East.

Finally, the early modern model of travel became obsolete in these years. Alongside the Chardins and Humboldts, intrepid scholar-explorers who industriously traversed, investigated, observed, and measured the Earth from pole to pole, there now appeared a new type: that of the commercially organized globetrotter or tourist.<sup>85</sup> A tourist, informs the Brockhaus *Conversationslexicon*, the leading encyclopedia for the German middle class,

is the name given to someone who travels not for any fixed purpose, such as in pursuit of a scientific objective, but only to have made the journey and then be able to describe it. He should be a man of cosmopolitan manners, habits and opinions, while otherwise as far as possible giving free rein to his subjectivity in everything he depicts.<sup>86</sup>

Until this point in time unrestrained subjectivism had been the worst offense a travel writer could commit, besides out-and-out fabrication.

Thomas Cook invented the package holiday in 1841. Tours from France to Turkey were organized from as early as 1833—surely an arduous and hazardous undertaking in those early days.<sup>87</sup> Travel guides to oriental countries made their first appearance in 1839: a utilitarian genre that had little in common with older travel reports, which had been written more for the benefit of stay-at-home fellow scholars. Journeying in 1840 in Upper Egyptian Thebes, Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau noted the “horrendous . . . devastastion inflicted by art-lovers.”<sup>88</sup> The currently fashionable tourist destinations, we read in the 1847 edition of the Brockhaus *Conversationslexicon*, are Scandinavia, Spain, Portugal, “and especially the Orient as far as India.”<sup>89</sup> More than two decades before the opening of the Suez Canal, India already lay within reach of the venturesome holiday-maker. News transmission and transportation began accelerating from the 1820s. Even before the invention of the telegraph, contemporaries felt that the world was shrinking before their eyes.<sup>90</sup>

The end of the era may be summed up in an image from October 1829: that of the sixty-year-old Alexander von Humboldt, the erstwhile conqueror of tropical jungles and icy Andean peaks, crossing the Caspian Sea in the safety and comfort of a modern passenger steamship.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, the original German version of this book was called *Die Entzauberung Asiens*. The keyword “Entzauberung”—the most common translation, though a problematic one, is “disenchantment”—will remind informed readers of Max Weber, and a Dutch reviewer of the book complained that this concept was neither defined with sufficient precision nor strictly adhered to in the presentation. Yet in a work of intellectual and cultural history such as this, I did not wish to plow the thorny field of Weber exegesis, culling from various passages in the great sociologist’s work a theory of the disenchantment “of the world” as a long-term process. It is partly to avoid awakening such expectations that I have chosen the English title *Unfabling the East*—a title that, in its very neologistic strangeness, draws attention to the way Enlightenment travelers and writ-

ers set about defamiliarizing and dismantling the long-cherished construct of “the fabled East.” In European eyes, the civilizations of Asia departed from the realm of fairytale over the course of the long eighteenth century. To be sure, images of the fabled East continued to tickle the fancy of Western consumers, from Antoine Galland’s translation of the *Tales from the 1001 Nights* (1704) to William Beckford’s Gothic novel *Vathek* (1786). Yet alongside such literary confections, attempts were increasingly made to demonstrate by means of rational description and analysis how these societies, their political systems, and their religious practices actually “functioned.” The countries of non-Christian Eurasia were by no means subsumed under an overarching concept of “Asia” or the “Orient” and placed in opposition to a similarly monolithic “Europe” or the “Occident.” Instead, they were presented comparatively and discussed in their idiosyncrasies. Stark East-West dichotomies were generally avoided, as was the finding that the entire continent had spent centuries languishing in an ahistorical coma or stuck up a backwater of world history.

When Max Weber, in a text from 1920, characterizes the disenchantment of the world as “its transformation into a causal mechanism” through “rational, empirical cognition,”<sup>92</sup> this precisely sums up the goal of enlightened European travelers and writers in the second half of the eighteenth century. There was no concerted effort on their part to exotize the “foreign” (here an anachronistic category) into an inscrutable Asiatic Other. Rather, writers subjected what they saw in Asia to the same standards of rational analysis and judgment that they applied to political and social conditions in Europe. Asia was demystified and made comprehensible within a single cognitive continuum.

The postmodern critique of European representations of other civilizations has constructed an artificial dilemma: either European observers of Asia, blinded by their universalist assumptions, are reproached with ignoring differences, or they are accused of falling into the opposite trap and exaggerating differences through “othering”—“Orientalism,” in other words. Both these simplistic and extreme positions are belied by the

complexity of the historical situation. The unfabling of the East in the late eighteenth century was bound up with its reevaluation. Whereas many Europeans in the mid-1700s had found much to admire or even emulate in Asia, especially in China and Japan but sometimes in the Arab desert tribes as well, by the end of the century Asia had been firmly assigned a place below Europe in the hierarchy of world civilizations.

Barriers to the use of force in Asia were removed one by one; the entire continent, deprived of the blessings of civilization and order, seemed to be crying out for European intervention, and Europeans increasingly felt willing and able to answer the call. Colonialism had been largely confined to the Americas until around 1760, but now it became both conceivable and achievable in Asia. The unfabled East became the lectured, harried, and ultimately vanquished East. Needless to say, this momentous change cannot be explained solely in intellectual terms. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the geopolitical and economic scales within Eurasia tilted towards the Western end of the continent.

Asia has never since been refabled or reenchanting in dominant European perceptions. The (early) nineteenth-century movement of romanticism showed relatively little interest in Asia, less than in the eighteenth century, despite Friedrich Rückert, the Schlegel brothers, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, despite Orientalist painting in France, and despite Turks and Arabs in the operas of Gioachino Rossini and Carl Maria von Weber. Two facets of an irrationalist view of Asia emerged more strongly towards the end of the nineteenth century: on the one hand, the threatening, demonic Asia conjured up by the fear of a “yellow peril”; on the other, an Asia of timeless wisdom that could be studied in the holy books of the East—the origin of later New Age fads for Tibetan Buddhism and the I Ching. Both variants remained niche phenomena. The condescending realism of men of commerce and colonial administration set the tone. Asia as a whole or its individual civilizations rarely awakened the kind of enthusiasm that had gripped leading eighteenth-century intellectuals from Leibniz and Voltaire to William Jones and Stamford Raffles.

The eighteenth century has acquired fresh relevance. In many respects, global power relations are shifting back to where they stood before the era of Western arrogance and supremacy. In today's multipolar world, the Eurocentric attitudes sketched in the last chapter of this book have lost all footing in reality. Europeans will need to exercise their powers of discrimination. They have no reason to sacrifice the values of their moral, legal, and political traditions to an indifferent cultural relativism. On the other hand, mental maps oriented to (Western) Europe and the North Atlantic will not provide them with the best guidance for the future. There is no escaping the fact that Europe cannot always do everything better.<sup>93</sup> When we recall the Eurasian equilibrium of the eighteenth century, it should come as no surprise that China understands its (re)ascension to a leading position in the global economy and global politics as a return to historical normality, not as a miracle. Recognizing Asia as a partner of equal standing should not cause Europeans any problems (the USA may find it more difficult). After all, Europe has done it before.