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The barbarian invasion

A new show at the V&A puts a positive spin on cultural exchanges between east and west. But in 500 years, have our colonial instincts really moved on?



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Crossing continents: Japanese Namban screen depicting the arrival of a Portuguese ship c1630

In 1492, Christopher Columbus "discovered" America. Six years later, a petty Portuguese nobleman called Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached India. These were, as Adam Smith called them, "the two greatest events recorded in the history of mankind". They marked the beginning of a great age of exploration and maritime trade, which resulted by the 19th century in complete western domination of the world.

Or so the old story goes, still found in books that describe how the modern world was created by the west, Europe, Britain, even Scotland; how from 1490 onwards, brave and resourceful Europeans ventured out into the great unknown, and showed isolated and backward natives everywhere the benefits of free trade, science, technology, and democracy.

Asia usually appears in such accounts as the passive beneficiary of some irrepressibly dynamic and uniquely gifted white people. But as the ambitious new exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800*, makes clear, Europeans were latecomers in the network of global trade and communications established by Arabs, Persians, Indians and the Chinese. While much of Europe lay torpid in the Dark Ages, Buddhism and Islam were travelling East through the Silk Route, and Arab, African and Indian merchants were crisscrossing the Indian ocean and the China seas.

Much before the 1490s, Arab and Persian sailors had gone up the west coast of Africa and into the Mediterranean. A Chinese sailor sailed up the east coast of Africa in the early 15th century. In fact, Vasco da Gama had dared to aim as far as the East Indies mostly because of navigational technologies developed in China and the Islamic Middle East and then diffused across Europe; and it was an Indian Muslim sailor who led Vasco da Gama to India after the latter had lost his way and ended up in east Africa.

Columbus, Vasco da Gama and their European successors come across in contemporary accounts and their own writings as cruel, even slightly deranged. Fortunately, the capacity for murder and pillage they displayed in the Americas was limited in Asia. In India, and then China and Japan, the buccaneers, missionaries, sailors, soldiers and diplomats of Europe faced rich and sophisticated states and societies, which wanted little from them and confined them to white ghettos on the coast.

The world economy then was dominated by the luxury goods - silk, ceramics, spices - produced by Asia. Not surprisingly, Vasco da Gama provoked derisive laughter in India when he produced the gifts he had brought from Europe. The British and Dutch traders who successfully undermined their Portuguese rivals in Asia by the 17th century only

entered Asian trade with the help of gold and silver extracted from Europe's American colonies.

Personal contacts with Asian peoples were achieved fitfully by missionaries, mostly Jesuits, men of the Counter-Reformation hoping to make up in Asia for Catholic losses in Europe. The Jesuits also introduced Asians to western advances in cartography, astronomy and clockmaking. But the story of the Jesuit mission in Asia is largely one of naive hopes and disappointment.

With an early agricultural and industrial revolution, and three path-breaking inventions (printing, gunpowder, and the compass) in its past, China was then a great economic and scientific power, if serenely self-absorbed. The Jesuit Matteo Ricci managed to get to know the country better than any European before him while trying to figure out why it was indifferent to Christianity.

But for most Europeans who knew of China or Asia at all they were no more than the source of exotic furnishing, porcelain, cotton, silks and wallpaper. The V&A exhibition displays many of these objects of European desire as well as the western forms of art and technology - clocks, guns, maps, lenses - adopted by Asians during the 300 years when economic and cultural globalisation wasn't the overwhelming phenomenon it later became under the aegis of European imperialism. In their introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, the curators claim that the "boundaries between different cultures" weren't fixed; and that until 1800 they were marked by "fluidity and hybridity".

The concepts of fluidity and hybridity are much cherished today in our globalised, multicultural societies; and the V&A has done well to attempt a contemporary spin on the early encounters of Asia and Europe. But, as with present-day globalisation, it is hard to marvel at the free flow and consumption of diverse commodities and artefacts without wondering whether they advanced understanding and sympathy across nations and cultures at the same time.

The evidence from the past is only partly encouraging. The few Asians who met Europeans tended to treat them pompously and arrogantly, and they remained largely ignorant of Europe until they began to feel its new power. Steven Parissien notes correctly in the catalogue that "the Asians responsible for the exotic imports remained an unknown quantity to most in the West, their homelands far-away countries about which most Europeans preferred to know nothing". Dr Johnson described all Asiatics as "barbarians", and conceded only, when pressed by Boswell, that the Chinese were not bad at pottery. Visiting China in 1792 on a diplomatic mission, Lord Macartney observed that the British expatriates in Canton mixed rarely with the Chinese; they may have sympathised with Philip Larkin, who wanted to visit China only if he could return the same day.

Lord Macartney also saw that China had grown militarily weak; and in the mid-19th century, the British called China's bluff. They had Indian opium to sell and found that they could bully the Chinese into buying it. Much of their confidence was due to unexpected success in India, where as the over-extended Moghul empire imploded in the 18th century, a vast subcontinent lay open to a multitude of warlords, both Indian and foreign. Swift British victories in India stoked imperial greed across western Europe. China was one of its victims, with Britain, France, Russia, and even Germany tormenting in turn and often together the once-invincible Middle Kingdom.

By 1800, the east, with its great declining empires (Ottoman, Moghul, Qing), no longer appeared very mysterious or admirable to the British. In 1783, while accusing the British East India Company of ruining Indian society and economy, Edmund Burke had dealt impatiently with the suggestion that Indians were an uncivilised people. He asserted that Indians were "people for ages civilised and cultivated - cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods". Such regard for non-European cultures became rare in the 19th century, when mass industrial production and technologically advanced armaments made Britain the supreme military and economic power in the world, and led it to easy conquests in Asia and

Africa.

Lord Macaulay thought that Indian learning was mostly worthless, and even John Stuart Mill assumed that Indians had to first grow up under British tutelage before they could accept the good things - democracy, economic freedom, science - that the west had to offer them.

This liberal paternalism rarely became as obsessive as the later rhetoric of the New Imperialism, which George Orwell described as "a sort of forcible evangelising" ("You turn a Gatling gun on a mob of unarmed natives and then you establish 'The Law' which includes roads, railways and a court-house"). The "white man's burden" - creating law and order, promoting the superior civilisation of the west - grew heavy only later in the 19th century. But then it was, as Orwell noted, always borne by the black and brown man.

It was especially heavy in the slave colonies of the New World that helped fuel the industrial revolution in England. It grew onerous in India as the East India Company acquired control over the eastern provinces of Bengal and Bihar, and as extortionate British demands for revenue forced Indian landholders and peasants into debt and destitution. Ironically, as the British historian Percival Spear wrote, "the days of corrupt Company officials, of ill-gotten fortunes, of oppression" were "also the days when Englishmen were interested in Indian culture, wrote Persian verses, and foregathered with Pandits and Maulvis and Nawabs on terms of social equality and personal friendship". Such British officials as William Jones and Warren Hastings enquired into Indian religions, laws, customs, literature and art, inaugurating a British tradition of scholarship that was weakened considerably in the 19th century by men who shared Lord Macaulay's views of Indian learning.

There were few white women in India; and, faced with prolonged celibacy, European expatriates had often acquired Indian wives and mistresses. A few British men continued to go native in this fashion even in the 19th century, when large numbers of eligible British women had begun to arrive in India, and the British in the coastal towns of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were already living racially sequestered lives. David Ochterlony, the British Resident in Delhi, went parading around the city every evening with each one of his 13 concubines on a separate elephant. Men like him, busy expediting British rule over India, were probably happy to escape the drab ghettos of the coastal towns, and to act out sexual fantasies which the envious bores at the church and the club would have denounced as Oriental decadence.

But these "Nabobs" still differed from previous foreign ruling elites in India, such as the Muslims from Persia and Central Asia, who had blended into the general population, and fashioned gradually a distinctive Indo-Islamic civilisation, of which the Taj Mahal, Urdu poetry, and North Indian dress and cuisine are the more conspicuous examples. Most of the Nabobs hoped to make their fortune quickly, before the onset of tropical disease, and then return to Britain.

No Taj Mahal was ever likely to emerge out of the Indo-British encounter. The hybrid art and architecture produced by it remained resolutely minor, occasionally rising to the pleasing kitsch of the Brighton Pavilion and Company School paintings. This was also the trend wherever Asians and Europeans worked together. Few of the objects built to appease European taste in Oriental luxuries, or the Asian artworks inspired by fantasies of Europe, match the glories of Renaissance Europe, Ming China and Moghul India.

Ideas were more fruitfully exchanged, most importantly in the realms of military technology, law, administration and nation-building, with consequences that are still working themselves out. Cultural assimilation, as it is known today, was rare on either side. Few Asians wished, or managed, to travel to Europe. And understanding Oriental cultures seemed to have grown harder for many Europeans arriving in the east three centuries after Matteo Ricci.

TE Lawrence, who went famously native in Arabia, confessed to being brought close to madness by his efforts "to live in the dress of Arabs, and imitate their mental foundation". They deprived him, he wrote, of his "English self" without helping him

turn his "Arab skin" into anything more than an "affectation".

It is not surprising that all the detailed and precise western knowledge about the East - the travel books, missionary accounts, administrators' gazettes - did not much help Lawrence in what was, essentially, an effort at empathy. Ruskin had despaired in the middle of the great age of British expansion and exploration: "If only we English, who are so fond of travelling in body, would also travel a little in the soul!"

But then to explore the soul was not easy for the selfless and honest men serving the impersonal bureaucracy of empire, such as TE Lawrence, who managed to persuade himself that, as a British secret agent, he was bringing political independence to Arabs, only to realise later that he had been part of an imperial effort to secure the "corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia".

The white man's burden was always more trouble than it was worth - as was proved again recently by the Anglo-American misadventure in Mesopotamia. But men conscious of this burden would change the world for ever, subjecting its great diversity to their own singular outlook, and reducing in the process potentially rich encounters with other peoples and countries to monologues about the unassailable superiority of modern western politics, economy, and culture.

They rarely noticed that western efforts, however sincere or altruistic, to modernise supposedly backward Asians incited more resentment than admiration or gratitude. Expelled from their old social and political order, and denied dignity in a west-dominated world, aggrieved natives wanted to beat the west at its own game. The Chinese intellectual in André Malraux's prescient novel *The Temptation of the West* (1926) says, "Europe thinks she has conquered all these young men who now wear her garments. But they hate her. They are waiting for what the common people call her 'secrets'."

Japan was the first to imitate western techniques, and aim at world domination. Modernising China now poses a formidable challenge to the west - more calibrated than the one presented by radical Islamists. Observing a humiliated country in 1889, Kipling had wondered: "What will happen when China really wakes up, runs a line from Shanghai to Lhasa, and controls her own gun factories and arsenals?" This old anxiety now has a strong basis as an aggressively nationalistic China rises swiftly, the words once used to dismiss its potential - "insular" and "arrogant" - are applied to its rival, the United States, and, with India waiting in the wings, the dominance of the west begins to appear yet another phase in the long history of empires and civilisations.

Looking back at the journeys of Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama, Adam Smith had written, "What benefits, or what misfortunes to mankind may hereafter result from these great events, no human wisdom can foresee." The books that tell us "How the west/Europe/Britain/ made the Modern World" seem to imply that we know better now. Perhaps, it is time to congratulate ourselves, or at least to celebrate what the catalogue of the forthcoming V&A exhibition calls a "dynamic period of commercial, artistic, and technological exchange". Certainly, the evidence for this would be compelling when the exhibition opens next week, even if the mute, obdurate beauty of lacquer and porcelain cannot express the melancholy truth that, as Walter Benjamin once put it, "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism".

• Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* will be published by Picador in October. *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800* is at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London SW7, from September 21 until December 5. Details: 020-7942 2000