

INTRODUCTION

East and West Entangled (17th-21st Centuries)

Rolando Minuti, Giovanni Tarantino

The original idea for this volume arose from a conference on entangled East-West histories that was held in February 2019 at the SAGAS Department of the University of Florence. Scholars from Chinese, Korean and Japanese universities participated alongside colleagues from Western universities. To complement the revised versions of some of those conference papers, several chapters exploring entanglements between trends in Italian research in Asian cultural history and the lines of interest of Asian scholars on Italian and European culture were specially commissioned for this volume¹.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb «to entangle» as meaning «to twist, interlace, or mix up in such a manner that a separation cannot easily be made». It derives from the noun «tangle», which is a species of seaweed. As Ralph Bauer and Marcy Norton have recently recounted, one of the earliest documented uses of «entangle» is in Richard Eden's *Decades of the New World* (1555), a translation of Peter Martyr d'Anghiera's history of European encounters with Native America. Eden writes that, while reconnoitring Cuba during the second voyage, Columbus's men tried to venture inland into a vast tallgrass

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plain, and soon became «soo entangled and bewrapte therin, that they were scarcely able to passe a myle, the grasse beinge there lyttle lower then owre rype corne». American nature not only entangles the European conquerors physically, it also «defies the imposition of a European order of things». The word's etymological roots remind us of the importance of moving beyond the «epistemologically indefensible nature-culture binaries» that sprang up hand in hand with European colonial ideologies seeking to legitimate the subjugation of indigenous peoples (Bauer and Norton 2017).²

In the global or globalised age, a culture is no longer regarded as a discrete entity, but rather as a hybrid formation that interacts with other cultures in an incessant process of multidirectional exchange.³ Eurocentric views that construct «a European singularity dating back to antiquity» and that fail to acknowledge the ways in which Europe has been influenced by the rest of the world have been accused of «theft of history» (Goody 2006).⁴ Translocal perspectives have led to a critical rethinking of categories such as «nation» and «civilisation», and many historians previously averse to theorisation have come to recognise its importance. «History has to reorient», as the historian and sociologist Andre Gunder Frank observed (1998).⁵ In modern cultural studies, space is not just physical or material, but also embraces a wide range of spaces – imagined, ascribed, mental, textual, corporeal, literary, and so forth. If it is to be inventive, a transcultural history of ideas, religion, environmental change, economic flows, urbanisation, and emotions needs to work with these very different notions of space, «globally encompassing understandings of the past» while remaining attentive to local particularities (Sachsenmaier 2006, 452).

Because historical research like this covers very different topics and spatial constellations, there is also a great diversity of methods: «ecumenical histories», «connected histories», «entangled histories», and «*histoire croisée*» are just some of the neologisms coined to denote attempts to offer more plural views of the past that incorporate alternative perspectives. However, a clear shift towards more transcultural research can be observed across the gamut of approaches. Of course, the task is not an easy one. In a provocative interview with *Cromohs*, Sanjay Subrahmanyam perceptively notes that transcending comparative history and redrawing geographical boundaries in an innovative way does not mean that

² In *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Tzvetan Todorov (1982) found himself trapped, or nearly trapped, in distinctions between 'advanced' and 'primitive' societies that historians and anthropologists have long rejected as hopelessly culture-bound.

³ On the constructedness of identity patterns and the perception and representation of the Other, in all their discursive variations, as considered by contemporary imagology, see Leerssen (2007).

⁴ Also see Feuchter, Hoffmann, and Yun (2011, 16); Chow (2001); Abbattista and Minuti (2006); Duffy (2021).

⁵ Also see Dirlík (1996); Martínez-Robles (2008); Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (2014). For a criticism of «a growing and ultimately teleological Sino-Western-centrism», see McManus and Tworek (2022).

«we replace one set of rigid boundaries (say, of the nation-state) with another» but rather we «multiply and cross archives and other primary sources, in keeping with the complexity of the problem» (Barbu 2017-2018, 124). As Dominic Sachsenmaier has aptly pointed out, «the claim that scholarship needs to become more multi-conceptual, multi-lingual and multi-angled» is not trivial, as it requires historians' voices «to become increasingly dialogical in nature and actively to include other interpretations of the past within one and the same narrative» (Sachsenmaier 2006, 462-63).

The writing of entangled histories presupposes an interest in «the agentic capacities of all actors», especially the ones traditionally ignored by Western-centric historiographic paradigms, with the sources all too often being «written by the winners». Unlike some transnational histories that still look exclusively at Europeans' *representations* of and impact on *others*, «entangled histories attend to the multiplicity of sources, agencies, directions of influence, and modalities of intercultural connectedness» (Bauer and Norton 2017, 3). They require a «decolonization of thought» (Viveiros de Castro 2014).⁶

In the few years separating the 2019 conference from the publication of this volume, events of unexpected importance and gravity have occurred on the international scene. Besides affecting lives on a global scale, they have also generated new research patterns and perspectives and reinforced the awareness of the importance of transcultural studies.

An exceptionally serious pandemic, which swept across a world ill prepared to deal with its effects, brought about major changes in everyone's lives, the social and economic consequences of which we are still far from being able to assess in full. It has also led to a change in the psychological conditions underlying human relations, especially between subjects who are very far apart geographically, as well as causing particular and objective difficulties in the conditions of research (Thompson 2021).

At the onset of this emergency, the likes of which most of us had never experienced previously, some people attacked the authorities for being unable to protect citizens from the contagion of a virus that became a swaggering metaphor of the unwelcome migrant corrupting the health of the body and mind, the economy and the culture of the community where it arrived. In the space of a few weeks, the virus shed East Asian somatic features and became Italian in the eyes of the world. Italians suddenly found themselves experiencing the condition of the foreigner deprived of their freedom of movement, rejected at borders, limited in their social interactions and viewed universally with suspicion, fear and contempt. Subsequently, variants of the virus began to be associ-

⁶ Also see Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa (2021); Berg (2023).

ated with individual nationalities (English, Brazilian, South African, Nigerian), grimly satisfying the instinct to project the emergence of a pathogen onto others.

The hope that we would emerge from this long crisis with a new perspective that recognised our common vulnerability, but also our common humanity, was soon dispelled. Instead, new and particularly violent and dramatic wars broke out in the heart of the European continent. Producing unspeakable tragedies and raising the disturbing prospect of catastrophically serious scenarios, Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine, Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's military response in Gaza have rocked the framework of international relations and fuelled identity ideologies, reactionary nationalisms and a rhetoric of labelling and othering.

In short, though only a few years have elapsed, profound changes have taken place, in which anxiety about the future, uncertainty and catastrophic visions have acquired new and powerful significance. This theme took centre stage at a recent conference held at Tohoku University in Japan,⁷ which highlighted the complex and highly evocative concept of *naraku*, meaning discord, dysfunction and dystopia, a notion that appears to correspond well to the mental climate and sensibility of the present time.

Placing the transcultural issue at the centre of attention does not appear to us, therefore, to have the same meaning now as it might have had only a few years ago. It has taken on a new prominence and importance, not only in terms of reconstructing global cultural connections in the past, but as a commitment to acknowledging the value of interconnectedness in the present context. The scholars who gathered in the now «distant» 2019 – as we are tempted to put it – and those who came together for this volume propose a framework of research that seeks to grasp the civic value coexisting alongside the research content.

The studies in this volume deal with topics from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. Eugenio Menegon's opening chapter aptly reminds practitioners of global history of the importance of scrutinising and reconstructing the economic and structural mechanisms (in particular the «materiality» of the Propaganda Fide and Jesuit missions to China) that made the circulation of information, funding and merchandise between Europe and China feasible and efficient. Linda Zampol D'Ortia's chapter closely examines expectations of and biases towards the «three Tibets» (Baltistan, Ladack, and Lhasa) through the lens of the Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733) and his ambivalent attitude towards Hindus and Muslims, «hidden Christians», and «gentiles». Chen Rihua's essay illustrating the significance of the spread of county histories (in conjunction with antiquarianism) in Early Modern England for the formative period of the nation-state, when the relationship between local lives and their national future came to

⁷ *Naraku: Discord, Dysfunction, Dystopia: The 7th Annual Hasekura International Japanese Studies Symposium, Tohoku University, Sendai, 27-29 September 2022.*

be strategically asserted and tightened, appears to echo recent appeals to historians who study landscapes and, more generally, the commodification of land, to look beyond aesthetic styles and to investigate socio-cultural discourses and the formation of national and individual identity. Significantly, this push to adopt «entangled landscapes» as a new research paradigm comes from scholars who seek to question both universal and binary assumptions of history by portraying the plurality of histories (Zhuang and Riemenschmitter 2019).

With its focus on the theme of female cross-dressing and the different concepts and renditions of female agency and gendered emotions in Chinese and English fiction in the eighteenth century, Wen Jin's essay shows very effectively how representations of other cultures are never simply descriptive, but involve locating (and often misreading or mistranslating) the other cultures within the symbolic and emotional frameworks of the observing culture. The issue of the translatability of emotions across cultures is also explored in the next chapter by Giovanni Tarantino, who uses a late Tokugawa Japanese scroll depicting a fire as the starting point for a reflection on «grammars of identity/alterity». The chapter is informed by an awareness of the problematic nature of two different but closely correlated interpretative orientations: on the one hand, the tendency to assume that emotional strategies for coping with post-disaster trauma are universal or at least translatable, thereby denying the specificity and value of different emotional cultures; and on the other, the propensity to represent the conventional boundaries of emotions (including «national emotional autostereotypes») in a lazily stereotypical manner, thereby ducking the challenge that historical entanglements pose for sound comparative analysis.

Recognition of the Jesuits' role as cultural mediators between Europe and the East, explored in the opening chapters, returns in Jong-Ho Chun's essay. This uncovers Voltaire's debt to the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Régis (c.1663-1738) for the praise of Korea and Koreans occasionally found in both his historical and dramatic works, where the underlying philosophical approach to history, informed by culturally biased ideas of progress and teleological accounts of history, is a broader search for meaning (conversely, to contemporary and no less biased 'Sinophobic' thinkers, Chinese paternalism would appear to be a deceptive shield for tyranny).

When Japan opened its doors to the external world around the 1850s, it struggled to grasp its intellectual landscape. Contact with Western civilisation led to a massive amount of translation, but discrepancies between the source and target languages inexorably created complex entanglements, as Nozomi Mitsumori's essay on the multifaceted history of the Japanese translation (*kyōwa*) of the term *res publica* convincingly shows. The impact of Western Enlightenment moral and political science – with its emancipatory conception of Nature as independent of any social or moral order – on the eastern Asian context is examined in the chapter by Sayaka Oki exploring the activities of a learned society from Meiji-period Japan, created to selectively promote and appropriate Western studies (*yokaku*) and to foster moral training (*shushin*).

The Second Anglo-Sino War (1856-1860) saw the birth of war photography, and the Italian-British photographer Felice Beato (1832-1909) was one of the

first people to take photographs in East Asia and one of the first war photographers. By analysing a selection of snapshots taken by an official in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs, a foreign-administered agency of the Chinese government, as well as a number of glass slides by other amateur photographers (all taken just before or during the Russo-Japanese War), Aglaia De Angeli's chapter demonstrates the value of photography, a Western import, in grasping the modernising process in late Qing China. This is followed by Edoardo Tortarolo's subtle analysis of the theoretical premises and analytical concepts underpinning the thinking of the Italian photographer, anthropologist and writer Fosco Maraini (1912-2004) in his reading of Japan. He viewed the country as «the essential modernizer», and contrasted the perceived Japanese model of societal evolution, based on a relation of continuity with the country's past and tradition, with the Italian model of evolution, predicated upon rupture and displacement.

Dong-Hyun Lim's chapter reverses the viewing direction in Chun's chapter and reflects on how, in the aftermath of the Eulsa Treaty of 1905, which made Korea a protectorate of Japan, Korean historians appropriated and recontextualised the history of the Italian *Risorgimento* accessed via Chinese or Japanese translations of Western works. The aim was to achieve a kind of self-strengthening through Westernisation, the hope being that Korea would become the «Italy of the Orient». In turn, in 1950s and 1960s Italy, at a time when most Western countries, Italy included, decided not to recognise the People's Republic of China, a group of mostly leftist scholars – as Guido Samarani shows in his chapter – set out to make the «New China» accessible and palatable to a broad and politically sensitive audience.

The volume closes with an essay by Aldo Giuseppe Scarselli that brings us into the twenty-first century, with an assessment of the peculiarities of gamic (or techno-)Orientalism as shown in a number of far-from-accurate depictions of Japanese history in videogames produced either in the West or in Japan.

Presented in the form of an afterword dealing with the historical problem of diversity, Guido Abbattista's interview with leading Peace Studies scholars Cheng Liu and Egon Spiegel reflects on the ways in which the challenging reality of global interdependence – creating a seemingly endless and unbroken web of world politics – needs to be sheltered from identity-driven conflicts. This can be achieved by promoting a plural, global, post-Western governance in which violence and war become taboo, and changes in one party have a meaningful impact on the attainment of the needs, values, and/or desired outcomes of others.

At a *shogakai* held at a restaurant in Ueno in October 1870,⁸ the widely admired Japanese artist Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831-1886), of whom the British archi-

⁸ Popular, on-the-spot calligraphy and painting performances, with works available for purchase.

tect Josiah Conder was a devoted pupil and patron, was arrested and imprisoned for painting images that purportedly insulted top government officials. At the time there was a good deal of popular resentment about the fact that the Japanese government was still paying to maintain the British garrison in Yokohama. Kyōsai claimed in his defence that he could not remember much about what he had painted that day because he had been too drunk. The only pictures he could recall were of two people helping a «long-legged» person (Ashinaga) to put on his shoes, and another of a «long-armed» person (Tenaga) plucking hairs from the Great Buddha's nostril. Ashinaga and Tenaga probably represented foreigners behaving without respect or discipline, or perceived as taking advantage of the Japanese government. According to a different account of the incident, the offending painting depicted a person in court attire being penetrated sexually by a foreigner (Koto 2022, 25-29; 174).

To conduct transcultural analyses, historians need to be alert to the multiple ways, ill-concealed comic intents included, in which «difference is negotiated» within contacts and encounters – from selective appropriation to rejection or resistance. The image chosen for the cover of this volume is a detail from a fascinating painting by the eighteenth-century Japanese artist Shiba Kōkan depicting representatives from Japan, China, and the West (probably from Holland) gathered around a table (see Tarantino's essay in this volume). This grouping is a variation on popular illustrations of the unity of the three creeds showing the Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius together, or, in eighteenth-century Dutch learning circles in Japan (*rangaku*), Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Jesus. Above the scene of the three worthies is one depicting the sometimes comic efforts being made by the fire brigades of the three countries to extinguish a fire engulfing a multi-storeyed pagoda. It is tempting to see the painting as a metaphorical representation of intercultural mirroring, containing the most inclusive of Gerd Baumann's «grammars of identity»: «What is lacking in us is (still) present in them» (Baumann and Gingrich 2004, 200). This entails the possibility of desire for the other, and sometimes self-critical relativism as well. Self-criticism, however, is not the same as self-denial.

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