

**ORIENTALISM:
BETTER 'SAID' THAN NOT**
Anand A. Yang
University of Utah

I typically begin my Asian Studies courses with a 'customs check' of the ideological baggage we all carry with us on our journeys into other cultures. To help us 'unpack' this baggage, I draw on the valuable and provocative leads provided by Edward Said's influential and controversial 1978 book on *Orientalism* that has justifiably been characterized as "a contemporary classic Not only has it wielded tremendous influence over many interesting and innovative works in North American humanities and social sciences, but *Orientalism*, perhaps more than any other text, has struck a blow against Eurocentrism in North America."

Indeed, *Orientalism* is a founding text for postcolonial theory and criticism. In the words of Gayatri Spivak, this work enabled the study of colonial discourse to blossom "into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for." Partha Chatterjee, one of the leading lights of the Subaltern Studies group, understandably found his initial encounter with the text revelatory: "I will long remember the day I read *Orientalism* For me, child of a successful anti-colonial struggle, *Orientalism* was a book which talked of things I felt I had known all along but had never found the language to formulate with clarity. Like many great books it seemed to say to me for the first time what one had always wanted to say."

This brief excursion into a rich and "classic" text is aimed at highlighting some of its principal arguments and at assessing its pedagogical value for Asianists and Asian Studies. Orientalism—once a term synonymous with any scholarly study of Asia—refers to, according to Said:

1. What Orientalists do and have done, that is, "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient . . . either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism";

2. A "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological definition between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'," that is, any writing that assumes "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny, and so on";

3. A "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."

In the third sense especially, Said's notion of Orientalism draws heavily on Michel Foucault's conception of discourse and the latter's ideas about the articulation of power on knowledge and knowledge on power. Said follows Foucault in viewing Orientalism as a discursive construction

whose language and conceptual structure define both what can be articulated and what is construed as truth. In short, the discourse of Orientalism—the medium which constitutes power and through which it is exercised—constructs the objects of its knowledge. In Foucault's terms, discourse generates reality—it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth; in Said's argument, the discourse of Orientalism shapes the 'real' East as a discursive Orient, a relationship of power and dominance that makes the Orientalist discourse more significant as a sign of power exerted by the West over the Rest than a true discourse about the Orient.

Orientalism as a form of knowledge is both different from, and superior to, the knowledge that Orientals have of themselves. Today's Orientalists in the West, Said and his supporters contend, have big monies—area studies centers and private and public foundation grants. They/we have the power to represent the 'Oriental,' to translate and explain his or her thoughts and acts not only to Europe and North America, but also to the 'Orientals' themselves. Whereas earlier generations of Orientalists created and capitalized on such knowledge to advance the imperial and colonial agendas of the West, present-day Orientalists construct "styles of thought" designed to further the New World Order of American capitalism and its consumer culture.

Orientalism, as discourse and ideology, is thus much, much more than what we in the classroom sometimes pass off lightly as prejudice or bias or just plain ignorance towards and about the Other—in our case, the peoples and cultures of the East. As conceptualized by Said, it is deeply embedded in every particle of our language, culture, and institutions, so much so that it pervades and participates in all our constructions of knowledge about and dealings with the Orient.

Orientalism portrayed (and still portrays) what Europe was not (and now is not); its categories and methods did (do) not, however, show what the Orient was (is). Orientalism perpetuates concepts of Self and Other as non-interpenetrating opposites, first in the colonial heyday and now in the postcolonial age. Orientalists, according to Said, talk about Europe, the United States, and about themselves through the fiction of addressing another subject, of using the idea of an Orient which they themselves have created (he speaks of the Orientalizing of the Orient) as a foil.

The Orient is not an actor in Orientalism because Orientalists, by discovery, decipherment, and selection, recreate an Orient whereby Europe/the United States become a known quantity, familiar and comfortable, whereas the Orient is its reverse. Orientalism insists on the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them'). These distinctions are shaped and reinforced by value judgments: the Occident was/is rational, virtuous, mature, normal; the Orient was/is irrational, depraved, childlike, different; the West was/is rational, developed, humane, superior; the East was/is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Orientalism commemorates a 'civilized' West in relation to a 'backward' East. Such a discourse relegates the Orient and the Oriental to an

unchanging inferior and degraded status, an equation that endows scientific status to theories of racial superiority and to justifications of colonial rule.

Condescending, manipulative, and text-centered, Orientalism supports European superiority over their colonized and semi-colonized subjects. Dogmatic and inflexible, it allowed no other 'truths' to gain currency during the nineteenth-century heyday of imperialism. Thus, "every European, in what he could say about the Orient," states Said, "was consequently a racist, an imperialist and almost totally ethnocentric."

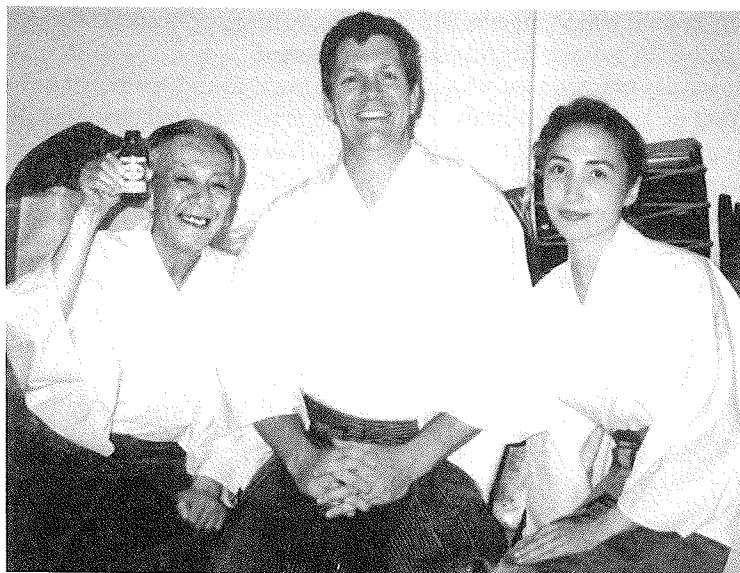
So there goes Asian Studies and any possibility of its contributions to knowledge about Asia because Said contends (more so in the *Orientalism* of 1978 than in his later works) that all Western knowledge about the Other (the Orient or the East) is a distortion, a form of fantasy that says nothing about actuality.

Not so say critics who have condemned Said for having distorted Orientalism's true history and meaning and for overly essentializing the essentialism of Orientalists and their writings. Not so say other critics who have not so much sought to tear down Said's provocative ideas as to build on them to forge new and exciting lines of inquiry—from those intent on locating the suppressed voice of the Other to those who have investigated the rich and complex experiences of

the subaltern.

Especially fruitful have been postcolonial writings that have challenged the totalizing aspects of Said's argument by highlighting variations, changes, and ambivalences in the so-called Orientalist discourse. By adding psychoanalysis to Said's Foucauldian analysis and developing the notion of ambivalence, for instance, Homi Bhabha has identified contradictions and equivocations in Orientalism that provide spaces for the Empire to Strike Back at what is otherwise characterized as a hegemonic formation. And by dwelling on the effects of colonialism on colonial subjects and on the subjectivities they sought to fashion, particularly as these relate to colonial women caught in the double bind of patriarchy and colonialism, Gayatri Spivak has also drawn attention to counter discourses and their vitality in enabling subalterns to mount challenges against Orientalism.

Criticisms and challenges notwithstanding, Said's *Orientalism* endures because it brilliantly and compellingly interrogates the authority of the modern West in configuring the Rest and because it has generated new approaches in postcolonial studies and criticism. Over twenty years later, *Orientalism* is still an excellent guide to unpacking the baggage we all start out with in our intellectual journeys to Other Places and Other Peoples.



l to r: Wakayama Taneo, St. Andrews Presbyterian College Freeman Faculty Mentor David Fish, Student Fellow Luanne Homberger at a Sanja Festival performance in Tokyo. Fish and Homberger were the first foreigners to perform with Wakayama's group, designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset.