

# Culture and the Western Mind

*Thresholds of Western Culture:*

*Identity, Postcoloniality, Transnationalism*

by John Burt Foster Jr. and Wayne J. Froman (Eds.)

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*Review by Van Yu*

Like many first-generation Americans, I have grown up regaled by nostalgia for the old country. My father, who is from the Chinese mainland, fancies himself a Taoist in Brooklyn—a stranger in a strange land. We hear the wisdom of Lao Tzu, however, over Thanksgiving turkey, next to a living room lined with bookshelves full of Dostoyevsky and Camus, and listening to Beethoven. My father is more a Western man than he thinks or would be able to admit. Handing his children tennis racquets and violins was not a sign of abandoning Eastern culture, he would insist, but instead was simply in the service of assimilation—a practical intervention for growing up in the States, a practicality born out of an Eastern sensibility at that. Methinks thou dost protest too much Father, you underestimate the surreptitious power of culture.

The most profound effect of culture lies in its foundation in the fabric of our thinking. Culture is not only the creative, aesthetic products of the minds of people—the art, music, and literature of civilizations—these are merely the peel of a much fleshier fruit. Culture is also the cause of how those minds think. This is the theme of the first part of the anthology *Thresholds of Western Culture: Identity, Postcoloniality, Transnationalism* (edited and introduced by John Burt Foster Jr. and Wayne J. Froman). In “Interiority, Identity, Knowledge: Unraveling the Cartesian Cogito” and “Subject, Self, Person: Marcel Mauss and the Limits of Poststructuralist Critique,” the essays that are the first part of the anthology (entitled “The Crisis of Modern Subjectivity”), Robert Strozier and Anthony John Hardings respectively examine the development of the modern Western mind. There is no natural or inevitable mode of thinking; instead thinking is born from culture, and in the case of Western culture, Descartes is the father of our intellectual process. Cartesian thinking dictates how one conceives of the notions of identity, self, subject, and personhood. These concepts in turn dictate how

an individual experiences himself and his relationship to others.

This function of culture, as conductor of thinking, is all the more powerful because it is also hidden; few are aware of the conductor. This function of culture is surreptitious because people do not ordinarily examine critically the cause of their own thinking; people may be more or less willing to question what they think, but it does not even occur to most to wonder about the process of their thinking. How one thinks is taken for granted. The idea of certain individual, human rights, for example, is not experienced as the product of thinking, but instead is experienced as traits that are natural or “inalienable.” Experienced this way, there is no inclination to examine critically.

This blind spot about the nature of thinking makes possible paradoxical notions in the Western mind about self and other, and these paradoxes have been exposed at the “thresholds” of Western culture. Descartes’ is an atomistic philosophy separating the consciousness of individuals into discrete entities. Descartes made it possible for the Western mind to feel ontological security locked alone in a room kept company only by the conviction that one can think in a vacuum. This bubble created by Cartesian thinking causes a separateness in the experience of one’s own personhood and self relative to other’s. At the outskirts of Western culture, for example, in former colonies and at the geographical crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, this distance has clouded the Western capacity for empathy. The Western self can experience his own inalienable individual rights, while at the same time denying others these rights, and not see the paradox.

This conception of the Western mind foreshadows culture’s path of destruction considered in the next three parts of *Thresholds of Western Culture*. These essays consider directly and indirectly the role of culture in fascism and the Holocaust (“Part Two: Shadows of Fascism and Western Culture”), Apartheid (“Part Three: Africa at the Passing of White Supremacy”), and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans (“Part Four: Eastern Europe After Communism”). Evidence for the interaction of culture and history is found in varied places including musical conducting styles (Herman Rapaport’s “Of Muscial Headings: Toscanini’s and Furtwangler’s Fifth Symphonies, 1939-54”), literature (essays by Michiel Heyns and Lars Engle about South Africa), and philosophy (Caroline Bayard’s “Bosnia and the Ethical Limits of Cultural Relativism: Re-Auditing Lyotard”).

Of course, that culture influences, even dictates the behavior of individuals, governments, and societies is not peculiar to Westerners. Eugene

Eoyang's "Western Agon/Eastern Ritual: Confrontations and Co-optations in Worldviews" (the last essay of the fifth and last part of the anthology, entitled "Far East/Far West"), is a reminder that non-Westerners' thinking is bound to culture too, albeit a different one. Eoyang contrasts the Westerner's proclivity for atomistic, black-and-white thinking with the Far Easterner's tolerance for ambivalence and grey. This flexibility allows the Far Easterner, for example, to embrace even contradictory tenets of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism and not see this as paradoxical.

The taken-for-grantedness of thinking, of course, is belied by the very existence of the book, and this one book is only an example of the volume of intellectual energy devoted to this kind of concern. What of my father then, a Far Easterner amid the Western canon? He is intelligent and well-read but unaware that the very process of his thinking has been hijacked by a foreign force. World leaders and others in positions of power are, like my father, not stupid, but I suspect largely dismissive of intellectualism and academia of a certain sophistication. The lessons of history are well-known, stories well-rehearsed in the educations of the average, intelligent citizen. It is not, then, simple ignorance that dooms us to repeat the atrocities of our predecessors. There are those who understand that our ignorance is of something more basic and fundamental. Until these people can wedge their critiques of culture into the Western conscience, culture will rule the Western mind.