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DO ASIANS HAVE AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX?

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Few statements about Asia-West relations can ever be wholly true or wholly false. Most of them must remain uneasy generalizations. Asians have neither race, colour, religion, ideology, language nor history in common; and the political grab-bag we know as the West is almost as diverse.

But two things do hold Asians together: the common experience of Western dominance and the fierce desire to be completely free of it. The diplomat from Bangkok, the Tokyo industrialist, the coolie in Hong Kong, the Manila lawyer, the teacher in Singapore, the Indonesian colonel and the Indian writer are bound — if by nothing else — by their awareness of the West. It may be outright hostility, well-reasoned dislike or, at the other ex-

treme, a sedulous and abject fondness. But it is always an obsession.

White Man's Bonus

Asians tend to exaggerate both their importance in the Western scheme and the place of the West in their own plans. This makes us painfully self-conscious and quite unready to treat Westerners as complete equals. Where does one find the *sang-froid* to treat an immensely rich uncle — uncle whose unwilling ward one has been for many years — exactly as one of the boys? One must either hurl a brick or kiss his hands.

Even that most recent achievement of Asian diplomacy, the Confederation of Malaysia, hailed everywhere as the final cutting-away of the Western apron-strings,

was not brought off without many a side-glance at London and Washington. One of the satisfactions derived from one's coming-of-age, it appears, is that of watching for any signs of discomfiture on the faces of one's erstwhile mentors.

Paradoxically enough, in Manila and other big Filipino cities, it is the social elite who show more signs of cultural insecurity vis-a-vis Westerners. By their behaviour they proclaim that they consider Americans and Europeans better managers for their business establishments, better guests at dinner and better husbands for their daughters than Asians.

White executives and employees command at least twice the salary given to a Filipino of equal ability and experience. The official reason is that the foreigner has a higher standard of living; but it does not fool anybody. A higher salary is simply the White Man's Bonus — a neat compensation for Kipling.

Manila landlords, offering houses or apartments to let in newspaper advertisements,

tack on the following announcement as a certification of quality: "For Americans and Europeans only." Visiting foreigners are lionized and feted within an inch of their lives: a white guest-of-honour is a status symbol, something like a TV aerial or the tail fins on a new American automobile.

Our middle classes and the people from the rural areas, less accustomed to foreigners, display a mixture of curiosity, awe and circumspect hostility. A sandalled, dark-glassed, barebacked American tourist strolling down a village street is a curiosity to be stared and gaped at and, from a safe distance, perhaps hooted at. After all, a white person is as outlandish and as rare in distant Filipino barrios as a polar bear.

Many Filipino women, like other Asians, are uncomfortable in the presence of white foreigners. I know several who will not go to a party if they are told beforehand that Americans are on the guest list; or finding them there unexpectedly, will try to avoid speaking with them. I do not think it is hostility or

racial prejudice so much as a feeling of unbridgeable distance. An American or a European is an utter, unknowable alien. But so would an African be. The fact is there hasn't been much of an opportunity to feel at home with foreigners. Even at the apogee of the Spanish regime or that of the American occupation, white foreigners never made up more than one percent of the entire population.

Light-Coloured Eyes

As in other parts of Asia, notably India, a fair skin, a sharp nose and light-coloured eyes are prized as attributes of beauty in the Philippines. The best proof is that a great majority of our film stars are Caucasians or Eurasians who have chosen Filipino screen names; and hair-and skin-bleaches are a popular article of trade. And why not? For centuries the ruling classes were white or half-white. And politics has shaped aesthetics.

The intellectual and cultural pupillage is even more marked. The most frequent and effective argument in any dispute begins with, "In

America . . ." or "Dr. A of USA says . . ." The cheapest, most tawdry item from an American department store is more precious than the finest Filipino handicraft.

Of course, for every provocation there are dozens of speeches and letters-to-the-editor denouncing "colonial mentality" and "inferiority complex." This ambivalence is particularly amusing in the question of inter-marriage. Sinibaldô de Mas (a kind of latter-day Machiavelli to the Spanish crown) recommended in 1842 that marriages between Spaniards and the natives of the Philippines be forbidden as a means of keeping the colony loyal and docile. When, despite official discouragement, these alliances occurred, they were socially disastrous for both parties.

Perhaps for that reason, many fine Filipino families still frown on marriage with whites; but many more, no less, consider such an alliance a welcome arrangement. It is quite common in Manila to hear of a father who is not on speaking terms with a daughter who has married an American. In a study of

Philippine social motives conducted on Manila factory workers, J. Bulatao cites a typical value judgment: "Marriage to a simple Filipino (although a 'financial blunder') is preferred to a foreign marriage . . . for the sake of cherishing things that are Filipino." Miscegeneration is unpatriotic! Yet people in coffee-shops will say of a rich, beautiful and talented Filipina: "Who can be worthy of her? She should marry an American!"

The contradictions can probably be resolved by remembering that some Filipinos have not got over the humdrum lessons of colonization ("Never trust a white man!") while others have been quick to learn the advantages of connections — another historical lesson, when you think of it.

Left-Handed Compliment..

The Indonesian attitudes are less complicated; or perhaps they only seem so because I know them less well. But one might say that, in general and despite a rather pugnacious nationalism, Indonesians take their former colonizers, the Dutch, quite

calmly. I have heard them describe their period of tutelage as "a blessing in disguise"; a left-handed compliment, since what they mean is: "At least we did not have our culture destroyed by colonizers like the Spaniards." Unlike Manilans, Indonesians treat their Eurasians with lofty contempt; and like Indians, they view Americans with humorous condescension.

The Japanese seem to be the most successful example of selective admiration of the West. Having got over their anti-social phase of isolation and conquest, they now appear to know just what they want from the West and what to discard. Of course in recent years, this discriminatory faculty has not been working as well as usual. The too-Westernized Tokyo teen-agers are every bit as absurd as the 'cowboys' and 'gangsters' in Manila. Still the Japanese seem to have developed a most level-headed, profitable and dignified way of dealing with Westerners.

Certainly the most curious thing about the Asian attitude in general is that most

every Asian will say more or less what I have been saying in these paragraphs without feeling that any of it applies to him personally. An Asian of any nationality will sit down with you and agree that fawning hospitality and craven diplomacy and double pay scales and intellectual subservience exist; but that he himself is an exception.

"Yes, I'm afraid we do retain," he will say in his best

objective manner, "an inferiority complex." Then, with lordly scorn, he will add, "Not that it goes for you or me."

I think that there are many more exceptions than we each individually suspect; but the wicked tale of our inadequacies and insecurities goes on ballooning over our heads, like a puff of smoke on a windless day. — *The Asia Magazine*, Sept. 1, 1963.

LIBERAL EDUCATION

Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy, however, enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life — these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a university; but still they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for consciousness, they attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless — pleasant, alas, and attractive as he shows when decked out in them. — *Alfred North Whitehead*.