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Dear Colleague:

I attended recently a conference on "The Construction of Time" at Stanford University. The conference was sponsored by the department of comparative literature, but the speakers included anthropologists, geographers, historians, and philosophers. The audience was even more mixed for it included physical scientists as well as New Age cultists.

There are a number of characteristics about the conference that I would like to draw your attention to because I feel they are a sign of the times. One is this. In a conference on time, the words "development" and "progress" are mentioned, if at all, only in derision. "Development" and "progress" suggest that hierarchies of values exist. No sensitive person nowadays likes to admit that, at least not in public. Moreover, these words have come to be associated with Western arrogance and dominance. Progress and the West are almost interchangeable: suspect the one and the other is also suspect. If "development" and "progress" are taboo, "narration," which implies temporal and historical consciousness, occupies central stage. Narration is somehow bad if it is used by anthropologists to account for a native culture, because it is then an artificial and willful construct and a form of cultural aggression. But if narrative power is found in a native culture, it carries positive meaning for it then means control over time and events.

The text of the conference is time; its subtext seems to be "bashing the West." Among white speakers an undertone of apology for their sins of intellectual imperialism is notable; minority speakers (only two present) nod in approval. My own talk provoked a curious question. Why is it so Western? I translate it to mean, Why have I (a minority person) not also joined the attack on the West? The answer seems to me obvious. In order to speak to white scholars as an equal, I am obliged to return the compliment they pay me: if they feel free to attack their culture's arrogance and errors, I must similarly feel free to attack my culture's failings. If I simply join the attack on the West, won't I have simply submitted to the discourse of the West, the prevalent fashion of which is to see little good in itself? Self-criticism among Western scholars emerges out of fundamental self-confidence. I want to tell my white colleagues that I have that kind of confidence too--that I am in no sense, not even in self-denigration, inferior to them. Alas, here I find myself truly among the minority--a minority of one.

Best wishes,

*Zi-In*