

February 15, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

I have been asked whether I will ever run out of ideas for these letters. My answer is no because they are not my own. Every idea in the letters can be traced to an external source. And yet in some sense I am original, even if the originality lies in a consistent misapplication of other people's thoughts. This observation about myself leads me to raise the question of the originality of a culture or society. If one looks at a culture--any culture--with care, one soon discovers all sorts of alien influences. As the unpacking proceeds, one wonders whether the culture has any core that it can call its own.

Consider Chinese culture at a height of confidence and splendor during the T'ang period (618-907). It was strongly influenced by the Turks. Among the great land-owning families of the North, at least one son was brought up to speak Turkish from his youth. T'ang poetry exhibits Turkish meters, and it might have been chanted to the rhythm of music of Turkish origin. The capital city of Ch'ang-an had no less than 2,000 foreign firms. Foreign religions penetrated China, including Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism. Buddhism, which arrived earlier, prospered. Some of the later foreign religions infiltrated the rituals of the secret societies which from time to time played an important role in political rebellions. Owen Lattimore asserts: "In periods of Chinese ascendancy perhaps even more than in periods of barbarian pressure or invasion, China was deeply penetrated by alien influences." (See Pastoral Production and Society: Cambridge, 1979).

I may borrow ideas from all sorts of people and come up with a brew of my own. On the other hand, I may submerge my own identity totally in that of a guru. A culture can behave in a similar way. It can open itself to all sorts of foreign influence and yet remain itself. On the other hand, it may totally embrace another culture's religion, whether it is called capitalism or socialism, and thereby risk losing its own identity. I seem to favor eclecticism and the retention of a sense of self; yet scholarship--the kind I admire--calls for the suppression of self. Arthur Waley is, in some ways, more Chinese than the Chinese, even though he has never been to China.

Best wishes,

