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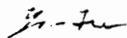
Dear Colleague:

As a young grad student almost forty years ago, one of the first things I learned from Carl Sauer was, "Eschew chronological snobbery." I thought I had learned the lesson well, but this is not so. When I read about the enlightened view of someone from the distant past, I can still be surprised. "Hey, our ancestors aren't all that dumb!" Consider the following incident concerning the T'ang emperor T'ai-Tsung. In the ninth month of the year 628, albino magpies built their nests in linked pairs on the palace grounds. This association of white birds with paired nests was viewed as especially auspicious. High officials went to congratulate the emperor, who, far from being pleased, exclaimed in anger, "I have always laughed at my predecessors' fondness for speaking about auspicious omens. A worthy man is an auspicious omen. How are white magpies beneficial to our affairs?" He thereupon ordered the nests torn down and the birds released (H. J. Weschler, Offerings of Silk and Jade, p. 60).

Just about every society has someone as enlightened as the Chinese emperor. We don't hear much about such individuals because what they say is universally true. Tai-tsung said it. But Charlemagne could have said it, or a Yoruba king. Our times seem to me remarkably perverse because we take pride only in the accidental and the contingent. As a Chinese American I am supposed to take pride in an omen which depends on the presence of two white magpies, apparently because only we Chinese have this particular hang-up. In Bantu culture--if I may make up an example--two black goats rather than two white magpies constitute an auspicious omen; and in American culture, no doubt two green bucks make one's day. So we are all different. T'ai-tsung would have said, "So what?"

Now, T'ai-tsung's enlightened attitude is dangerous. Our humanity--our loveableness--depends on having these nonrational peculiarities. If anyone is inclined to throw a friendly arm around my shoulder, it is because I (poor guy) believe in white magpies rather than because I consider such belief a superstition. Nevertheless, it seems to me a mistake to be proud of the peculiarities of one's culture; the appropriate feeling is surely affection.

Best wishes,



P.S. Correction. I apologize for an error of attribution. It was George Washington rather than Thomas Jefferson who complained about the intrusiveness of governmental watchdogs (vol. 6, no. 13).