

October 1, 1992 (Vol. 8, no. 3)

Dear Colleague:

On November 7, 1904, the American ambassador declared to British supporters of the Scott expedition to the Antarctic thus: "If you will only let Captain Scott continue his great work and complete the map of the world by planting the Union Jack upon the South Pole and let our Peary proceed with his disciplined followers and plant the Stars and Stripes upon the North Pole, why then you will make the two ends of the great world meet and leave the globe that we inhabit as it properly should be--in the warm and fraternal embrace of the Anglo-Saxon race" (L. P. Kirwan, A History of Polar Exploration, p. 273).

Well, the Anglo-Saxon race is still happily engaged in joint conquest of the earth. I have in mind here not only the Falklands War, but also the joint mapping expedition of the US 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone on a British research vessel--the Farnella. The captain is British and more than half the scientific crew is British, but the sponsor is the United States Geological Survey and the ultimate purpose of the expedition is to establish American territorial rights over broad strips of the ocean.

Oceanographic mapping has made enormous progress since the end of World War II. So much new knowledge of submarine topography is gained that Western scientists are hard-pressed to come up with names to label the numerous mountains, ridges, and chasms of the ocean floor. So they use characters from J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasies. And, having exhausted famous novelists, they use the names of musicians. Somewhere to the north of Hawaii lies a row of Musicians Seamounts--from Strauss in the north to Mendelssohn in the south. There is a Bach Ridge and a Beethoven Ridge. There is also Mount Mozart. James Hamilton-Paterson comments: "The presence of this random clutch of composers engloutis in the middle of Pacific wastes is a reminder of how much of the physical world [still]...belongs to the Western nations" (The Great Deep, p. 38)

As a Chinese-American, I think sadly of how far we "people of color" (ugh!) still have to go. We can change, say, Queen Victoria Boulevard in Shanghai to Mao-tze Tung Avenue, change Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, but these are mere political accomplishments. We don't have the scientific know-how to discover submarine canyons, which we can then triumphantly name after our own heroes--Leopold Senghor, Alice Walker, etc. Suppose my Caucasian friends read this letter and say: "Poor Yi-Fu. Next time we find a submerged volcano we'll call it the Amy Tan volcano." Now, I ask my fellow nonWesterners, does this kind gesture on their part really add to my self-confidence--my dignity? Won't we do better in the long run if we just hit the books?

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*