

June 1, 1993 (Vol. 8, no. 19)

Dear Colleague:

We Third Worlders can forgive the West for its imperialism and exploitation. After all, these crude and greedy acts make the West look bad and us, as aggrieved victims, good. What we can't forgive--and is the underlying cause of our deepest resentment--is the West's scientific-technological achievement, which even now grinds us down, makes us feel inferior. Consider the matter of the clock. The National Institute of Standard is discarding the old clock, because it is inaccurate: if you make an appointment with a Martian for a conference three million years hence, you may be late by as much as 10 seconds--a social disgrace! The new atomic clock is still imperfect: it may be off by one second in the year A.D. 3,001,993. Of course, we Third Worlders can always say that we got the whole venture started with our initial idea for the sundial or the waterclock. But such subterfuges convince only young children and college students. They remind me of a New Yorker cartoon, which shows two beavers conversing at the foot of the massive Boulder dam: the one says to the other, "Well, I didn't actually build it, but it was based on my idea."

When Chinese intellectuals, late in the nineteenth century, finally had to confront Western achievement, they flipped. They lost their cool and came up with two absurd ideas to salvage their sense of cultural centrality. The first is that the Chinese actually invented the major technologies but somehow lost them to the West. (So you see, in sheer verve for fantasy, the Chinese were a hundred years ahead of the Africans). The second idea is just as bizarre, though I have a personal fondness for it, namely, that Chinese and Caucasians were of the same race that somehow got separated. The implication is that the Chinese can claim as their own all the scientific breakthroughs of the Caucasians, because, after all, they are brothers.

We Chinese are better off than many other Third Worlders, because as every schoolchild knows the Chinese contributed paper, gunpowder, and the compass to the world's storehouse of technical goods. We contributed in other ways as well. We even invented affirmative action, although, in our case, it quickly degenerated into reverse discrimination. The Emperor Kang-hsi (1661-1722) complained: "Shih Shih-lun has complete integrity, but he swung too much in favor of the poor--in any law suit, he favored the commoner against the junior degree holder, and he favored the junior degree holder against the upper gentry. In the same way, Yang Ming-shih insisted on failing the rich examination candidates and pass the poor, even if the latter didn't do as well."

Have a good summer,

