

The West: Concept, Narrative, and Politics  
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The West as Seen from the Far Away East

Europeans easily imagine that they are situated in the West, and that a place defined as the East certainly has to exist somewhere, most likely in the eastern direction. If the boundary is not easy to draw with areas close to Europe, then the area that used to be called Far East, though nowadays preferably East Asia, certainly must be the region where the East can be found. However, in practice, the situation is conceptually very complicated. After the Cold War many Americans have increasingly started to regard Europe as part of the East, while East Asians do not in all circumstances regard themselves as separate or different from the West; culturally or politically they can see themselves as West. The West and the East are only ostensibly geographic concepts: "places". It is difficult to analyse them as concepts of space, because all sorts of anomalies appear as the perspective moves to different parts of the globe.

It is more analytically fruitful to treat these two terms as action concepts with deep historical layers. The overriding contemporary meaning of the West is political. It is a collection of states, which changes its shape like an amoeba over time, but it is continuously acting: making economic or military interventions in the rest of the world, establishing norms of the international system, evaluating the behaviour of the states of the system, either praising or condemning, and all in all making an incessant big noise in the world. The West is like a big band playing noisy jazz with a shifting membership. The states participating in the band change depending on the operation at hand, and for this reason a specific state can sometimes appear within the West, sometimes without it. Understanding the West as an action concept of course has to consider the United States as its nucleus, and in this sense belonging to the West can be seen as a degree of the propinquity of a relationship primarily with the US, and secondarily with the EU, which before World War II used to form the nucleus. The main interest in the paper will be on Japan and China, which have participated in the West in quite different ways.

In the case of Japan its joining the West started after the Meiji Restoration in 1867, after which it westernized many elements of its society and polity, which by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century elevated it to the category of "civilized states", which at that time was a sort of synonym for the group of countries called nowadays the West. A stronger move to that direction took place during the Cold War, when Japan as the principal US ally in Asia became an indispensable member of the Western block (西側の一員, *Nishigawa no ichi'in*). At the same time Japan was the only functioning parliamentary democracy with a capitalistic economic system in Asia, and it was also very developed. Another conceptual division at the time ran between the Third World and the West, and also here Japan clearly belonged to the West. However, Japan always forms a trap for a conceptual historian, because it is always impossible to place it purely to a single category. It is made up of a complicated mixture of imported and traditional elements. If one defines it as a member of the West, there always follows a "but ...", implying its belongingness also to non-Western categories, such as Asia, East,

Sino-Indian cultural traditions, etc. Nevertheless, also the opposite holds true. If one defines Japan into a category of non-West, the same “but ...” follows. Japan exists simultaneously in a number of categories.

China is a more straightforward case. It was indeed a major ally of the United States since their rapprochement in 1972 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but after that their relationship has cooled down somewhat. China also has a history of very rapid development, turning a large chunk of its economy capitalistic, but the main thrust that made hundreds of millions of Chinese middle class and some very rich capitalists has taken place during the past 25 years, when partial opposition and clear criticism to the West has been the prevailing norm. China has also stayed formally Socialist, even though the characterization is nowadays fairly empty. Of course, Socialism and Communism are also originally European political ideologies, thus imported Western elements in China, just like the modern Capitalistic forms of entrepreneur and consumer behaviour, so that there is much of the West deep inside China nowadays, but in terms of political groupings China does not belong to the same US lead big band. Nevertheless, that does not make modern China anti-Western either. It is the greatest beneficiary of the current free trading international order, and one of the main actors holding it together. International integration, and “win-win” cooperation with all countries of the world irrespective of their political orientation is the core of Chinese foreign political argumentation.

Thus, the main point of my argument is methodological: understanding of the concepts of the West and non-West as locations is not very fruitful, because it may hide important nuances in the global political order. Understanding the West and non-West rather as action concepts brings more nuances into the picture, and takes the game outside of ordinary Aristotelian logic.