

# **Orientalism in South Korea through the Eyes of their People**

**Paper/Essay by Gerli Koort**

## **Introduction**

*“Orientalism is a particular historical manifestation of this ethnocentric orientation. It is based on a Western consciousness which "includes a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections." (Said 1993:90)*

This paper tries to show how cross-cultural conflict often occurs between Korean and Westerners as the result of imposing one's own cultural meanings onto another culture. Interpretations of Korea, as well as other Asian cultures, often carry an implicit assumption that the West is rational and superior whereas the East is bound by ancient traditions and is therefore inferior. "Orientalism" has been identified as the particular form that Western stereotypical understandings of Asian cultures have taken. Intercultural communication becomes highly problematic as long as stereotypes are held and as long as the other culture is seen as foreign and wholly other.

Orientalism as cultural myth had been articulated through metaphors which characterize the East in ways which emphasize its strangeness and otherness. The *Orient* (whatever that term may signify) is seen as separate, passive, eccentric, backwards, "*with a tendency to despotism.*" (Said 1993:36) What Edward Said says of stereotypes of Middle-Eastern peoples applies to East Asian stereotypes as well: the Oriental person is a single image, a sweeping generalization; an essentialized image which carries with it the taint of inferiority. Although in the United States it is now more politically correct to refer to "*East Asian studies*".

when speaking about research related to China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, the University of London still boasts with the term *The School of Oriental and African Studies* (SOAS) - perhaps a throwback to colonial days. This is an appellation which lumps just about all the peoples from Turkey to Korea under one rubric, which all its connotations of exoticism and foreignness.

By transcending this "Orientalism" we will be in a better position to understand and communicate with those from another culture without having to set up a boundary between "us" and "them." Conflict, misunderstandings and confusion with Korea is focused on 1) because there seems to be a lot of it, and 2) because Korea represents a unique culture field which is, in some ways, both modern and familiar, yet in other ways seemingly foreign to Western interpretive structures. This paper will call into question some of the stereotypes that Koreans have developed about Westerners as being a rich culture which is excessively authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal.

### **The Term “*Orient*”**

In European historiography the meaning of “*the Orient*” has changed in scope several times. Originally the term referred to Egypt, the Levant (also known as the Eastern Mediterranean), and adjoining areas. Later the term became synonymous with Islam and Judaism and its scope expanded both eastward and westward to include all non-European areas of Eurasian civilization, including North Africa as far west as Morocco. By the mid-20th century Western scholars generally considered "the Orient" as just East Asia, Southeast Asia, and eastern Central Asia. Today the term primarily evokes images of China, South and North Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and peninsular Southeast Asia.

### **The Term “*Oriental*”**

The adjectival term **Oriental** has been used by the Western world to refer to cultures, peoples, countries, and goods from the Orient. “*Oriental*” means generally and simply put “eastern”. In contemporary English, *Oriental* usually refers to things from the parts of East Asia traditionally occupied by East Asians and most Central Asians and Southeast Asians. This excludes Jews, Indians, Arabs, and most other South or West Asian peoples.

In 1978, Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said published his influential and controversial book, “*Orientalism*” in which he used the term “Oriental” to describe a pervasive Western tradition, both academic and artistic, of prejudiced outsider interpretations of the Arab and Muslim worlds, shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism in the 18th and 19th centuries.

# 1. Orientalism and the Islamic philosophy

Orientalism is the concept that there is something very special and different about the thought of those living in the East, which can be discovered through the methods of scholarship current in the West. It is a reflection of the relationship of imperial and intellectual domination of a West which feels it is superior to an 'inferior' East. This often results in an understanding of Islamic philosophy which sees the latter as essentially unoriginal, derivative and of only historical interest. While orientalists have produced interesting and important work, most fail to appreciate the independent status of the material which they analyse.

*The notion of Orientalism* - Orientalism is the branch of scholarship that uses traditional Western methods as a means of understanding and gathering knowledge pertaining to the Orient. On the one hand, Orientalism has given us much of what we know about the Oriental world at large. Late nineteenth-century authors are especially worthy of consideration for their contributions to an understanding of foreign cultures and peoples. On the other hand, however, several problems arise from the attitudes and methods used in traditional Orientalist discourse, which in turn has had an impact - often negative - upon Western consciousness. This influences and distorts the framework through which the West approaches the Orient in general and Islam in particular.

The Orient encompasses a far greater area than simply that of the Arabs and the Muslim community; exotic images from India, China, Japan and Korea are conjured up in the minds of Western people when they think of the Orient. However, Orientalism has had a particular impact on the study and understanding of Islamic philosophy.

Orientalism has several different but interrelated meanings. In its general sense, it describes the way in which the West looks at the Orient in order to understand it within the context of Western experience. More specifically, Orientalism is a categorical approach by Western scholars as an attempt to form a collective body of knowledge about the Orient.

## **2. South Korean Orientalism:**

Although the East has existed for a while it is still a relatively recent thing for Koreans to get to know “the others”. Korea had been called the Hermit Kingdom before they met the strangers from the West. The Hermit Kingdom is a term applied to any country, organization or society which willfully walls itself off from the rest of the world, both metaphorically and physically.

The Joseon Dynasty of Korea, dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> and lasted till the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was frequently described as a Hermit Kingdom, but the term is still common throughout Korea and is often used by Koreans themselves to describe pre-modern Korea. However, South Korea is making great efforts to have a more “western” and understanding view of the West and for this reason, the term is mostly applied only to North Korea, which is probably going to stay a Hermit Kingdom for many years to come.

When it came to getting to know the Western world, South Korea, like in many other similar cases, also followed modernization in an American fashion. Modernization comes with its customs and sources of information that ultimately connects “the modern” and “the modernized” – the views and the people. In this respect, South Koreans got their eye-opening lenses and examples from Americans through which they decided to see “the others”.

However, South Koreans, just like the Japanese, the Arabs and others, are also well aware of the fact that they are something exotic for the Western people (mainly for Americans) and are generally referred to as the Orient or Oriental.

Despite their open-mindedness and understanding of other nations, the Koreans’ view of the West is still much more ignorant than that of the West. Koreans are more unaware towards the culture and people of the West mainly because while the West has several sources of information on the Middle East particularly due to emerging pluralism in the media and internet, the Koreans lack this variety of options.

Although the Korean media gets its information from similar sources as the West and as for the internet, Koreans are probably the most active internet users on the planet, yet they do not

inquire much. It is my personal observation that Koreans prefer instant knowledge, copy-pasting and sharing immature or in some cases incorrect information. Otherwise, how would it be possible that so many (probably the majority of) Koreans have “the same” misperceptions and misinformation for example about the Middle East and the Muslims?

Let us take the “*knife-Quran*” image (Knife (سكينه) is mentioned in the Quran in the story of the noble prophet Yusuf (Joseph) as an example. After asking many Koreans about the said issue/connection, many of them said unabashedly that they had always been taught that the Muslims have the Quran in one hand and a knife in the other ready to kill all the non-Muslims. Indeed, my Korean friend has told me that he has seen a picture of this image in a presentation given by his Korean professor on the topic “*terrorism*”.

Of course Muslims can partially be blamed for this insulting image due to their more violent attitude towards changes, but the mainstream Western media (particularly the likes of Fox, BBC, CNN) has, in my opinion, a huge responsibility for creating this negative and disturbingly wrong image. It is in some ways done intentionally which makes it *wrongful* or *unashamed* propaganda, but in some cases it is done unintentional which then can be called *ignorant* Orientalism.

In Korea, the wrongful images of the West are in my opinion mostly created through unintentional ignorance, and therefore by Orientalism. Koreans are sadly rather gullible and tend to believe what they see on TV about the Middle East, the Muslims and about pretty much everything. Therefore, their lack of knowledge about Muslims and Islam and of any other religions can be understood to some extent. This is why Koreans also tend to call Allah “*Allah shin*” which literally means “*Allah god*” as most of them do not know that the Allah that the Muslims believe in is “*The God*” in Christian’s belief.

However, unfortunately, there are always some who tend to work very hard to make these negative and false images true and falsely spread them till they are actually believed in. For example, I was informed by some of my Christian Korean friends that some churches in Korea teach Koreans the “*Quran-knife*” image about the Muslims as if it was true and often practiced in the Arab countries. This so-called “teaching” process can however be quite harsh and unimaginable since it is well-known how aggressive Koreans can get when enforcing their

missionaries. Despite this, I still believe and hope that this is also a result of a word-of-mouth Orientalist ignorance towards the truth and disinterest in looking deeper into the issue rather than an intentional grudge.

## 2.1 Bits from Real Life

Since the Korean Orientalism is something that not many are familiar with, I would like to bring out some more examples on this issue in order to emphasize the mindset of Koreans about the West more clearly.

In the year 2008, the Korea-Arab Society was introduced by the Korean Foreign Ministry in an attempt to make a polite gesture to the “oil-rich” Arab countries. The initial plan was to name it the Korea-Middle-East Society, but the Arab countries opposed to this idea since it would vaguely include Turkey as well as Iran. The same year the Korean Foreign Minister, Yu Myung-hwan, wrote an article entitled “*Seeking a New Silk Road*” in the “Korean Herald” about the Korea-Arab society ([1]).

Let it be stated here that the “*Korean Herald*” is Korea’s leading English newspaper, which occupies over 50% of Korea’s English newspaper sector and is considered the nation’s top English-language newspaper. With differentiated and high-quality English news content, the “*Korean Herald*” is currently being distributed in over 80 countries around the world. Over 1 million readers visit the online edition of the paper daily. The Korea Herald represents Korea’s media in today’s international community.

The Korean Foreign Minister wrote the following introduction of the Korea-Arab society: “*Edward Said, an established Arab-born scholar, criticized in his book "Orientalism" the subtle and persistent Euro-centric prejudice against the Orient, particularly against the Arabo-Islamic peoples and their cultures. The irony is that the prejudice portrayed in "Orientalism" does not only exist in the West, but we Koreans, who are a part of the greater Asiatic world, also hold a degree of prejudice and misperception with regard to the Middle East. This phenomenon may be*

*the result of Western influence on Korean values, as Koreans may have unwittingly taken in the Western perception of the Middle East.” [1].*

From this paragraph we can see that the Foreign Minister fully admits the strong Western influence on the Korean society and how it affects the minds and awareness of their people, resulting in wrong views on the Eastern world.

However, this was only the second paragraph of his introduction. In the first paragraph, he wrote about his visit to Uzbekistan and said the following: *“This is just one piece of evidence which shows that Korea and the Arab world share a long historical connection dating back over a thousand years.” [1].*

Since when is Uzbekistan referred to as being part of the Arab world? Or is this another example of Orientalism and Koreans’ unawareness? Interestingly, the same article was republished in the *“Korea Focus”* journal a few weeks later and that part was “revised”, which basically meant taking it entirely out of the article as if the Minister had never made that kind of a gruesome mistake.

Furthermore, in the same article, the Foreign Minister refers to the Muslim residents in Korea as *“Islamic workers”*. There may be more workers than other professions, but still referring to them as *“Islamic workers”* instead of *“Muslim workers”* does not suit a Foreign Minister especially in an article about Korea-Arab Society.

Despite these mistakes, the Minister stressed regrettably how unfamiliar most Koreans are with the Islamic theology, culture, philosophy, let alone with its literature. Fortunately, Koreans' misperceptions of the Middle East are slowly changing. Changes can be felt across the society as a whole. Middle Eastern Art exhibitions are frequently held while a wealth of information on the Middle East travels to Korea through the internet.

The Korean public's increasing interest in Middle Eastern culture is a phenomenon much-welcomed and anticipated, appealing to the growing maturity of Korean society, currently home to approximately 100,000 Islamic workers. Meanwhile, as Middle Eastern countries are becoming more open toward foreign cultures and with the spread of the internet, in particular, Middle Eastern societies' interest in diverse cultures is also growing.

All this has given rise to the need to reexamine Korea's Middle East policy and to redefine Korea-Middle East relations.

The Korean government is well aware of the fact that just like mutual interest and understanding are needed to solidify personal relationships; a mature and solid relationship between countries requires a comprehensive understanding and compassion towards each other's culture, tradition, history and religion.

With this idea in mind, the Korean government has taken the initiative to establish an organization called the Korea-Arab Society to nurture the "Middle East momentum" and to enhance mutual understanding between the Korean and Arab peoples. Participants from political, economic, academic, cultural and religious sectors from both Korea and the Arab world will take part in various events which the Korea-Arab Society will be organizing, including economic, cultural, and educational activities all aimed to broaden the areas of mutual cooperation.

So far, many Middle Eastern and Arab countries have not only welcomed the launch of the Korea-Arab Society, but also expressed firm support for the organization. Heads of states, high-level government officials, the academia, prominent individuals, representatives of business industries and mass media from Korea and the Arab world attended the worldwide International Conference to Launch the Korea-Arab Society, held on May 26, 2008 in Seoul. To celebrate the establishment of the society, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade were hosting a Korea-Arab Cultural Festival from May to July in collaboration with eight Arab countries - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

Today, Korea and the Middle East are reencountering each other on the "new Silk Road" of the 21st century. As the word "Silk Road" means nowadays a channel for various exchanges between the East and the West, including political, cultural and religious exchanges. According to the belief of the Korean Foreign Minister, the Korea-Arab Society will most successfully serve as a "new Silk Road" and the launch of the Korea-Arab Society will create a momentum for people of Korea and the Arab world to (re-)discover each other and open up new horizons for Korea-Arab relations.



## 2.2 The Images of Israel and Turkey in a Korean Mind

### *Israel*

One of the most recent examples on the Koreans' unawareness is a news article that I read in "Korean Herald" in the year 2010, in which a Korean journalist wrote about Israeli President Peres' visit to Seoul. This certain article states that Peres' visit was downgraded from official to working-level due to the "*pressure from Arab and Islamic countries.*" [2]

First of all, the term "Arab and Islamic countries" does not make any sense. What exactly was meant by this?

Secondly, I wonder which countries had pressured Seoul to downgrade Peres' visit. Saudi Arabia? Egypt? Syria? I do not think so. The pressure was not from the Arab countries or from the so-called Islamic countries. They were dealing with an international pressure. Israel's wrongdoings were not only condemned by the Muslims as evidenced by the presence of so many non-Muslims on the aid ships that bounded for Gaza.

But why is this statement so important? Because this was not a simple mistake made by a random Korean journalist, but a representative example of how Korea, including the Korean government, views the Israel-Palestinian issue (and with this most of what is going on in the West). When it comes to condemning North Korea for attacking South Korean navy ship, Korean government pursues very active diplomacy; however when it comes to Israel and its issues in the West, they seem to be concerned only with trade and bilateral relations between Israel and South Korea and in a way that as if states that "*It is your problem, deal with it, Arab and Islamic countries.*"

## ***Turkey***

Koreans have had and in some places still have quite an interesting Orientalist image of Turkey. In the 80s and 90s there was a quite widely used and very offensive term circling among the Koreans – “*Turkish Bath*”, which referred to those places that provided adult services in Korea and Japan (*toeki-tang* in Korean and *toruko-buro* in Japanese). Luckily, in 1984, the former Turkish President Turgut Ozal started a successful government diplomacy, which worked well in getting rid of this name in the Korean society.

Although, this term was an invention of the Japanese, which is another country that orientalizes Turkey and the Middle East, those particular places had nothing to do with Turkey or its *hamam* (Turkish bath) culture. It was only an exotic and Orientalist reflection of their fantasies about the Harem. Koreans copied the Japanese and in both countries, until recently, those places were said to be one of the first things that came to the mind of Japanese and Korean when they hear the word “*Turkey*”.

Though, Turkey is probably luckier than other Muslim countries. During the Korean War (between the years 1950-1953), thousands of Turkish soldiers helped the Koreans and left a good image of Turkey and Turkish people behind them. They shared their food with the locals; they opened an orphanage-school for Korean kids; Turkish medics cured Korean locals; and their presence and bravery benefited a lot during the hot battles.

Therefore, Turkey’s image is much better than that of other Muslim countries. The old people remember Turkey as the “brother country”; the younger Koreans were reminded of this during the World Cup of 2002, where they passionately cheered for Turkey as well as for Korea. This special relationship improves the image of Turkey in the eyes of Koreans, yet the image of Turkey being a negatively viewed Muslim-populated country counters this positive image.

### 3. How to Manage Orientalism

In the year 2009, a respected journalist of “*SM Times*” (Korean Times; newspaper equivalent to NY Times magazine) Park Bae Hyewon wrote an article on “*How to manage Orientalism*”, which gives some insight on how the Koreans views themselves compared to the rest of the world and how they think and judge the Western people. The article begins with the stereotypical imagery of a Korean woman and continues with the showcasing of Korean female beauty [3].

#### **Orientalism – The Janus Face**

As modernization was led by the Western society, the East became passive phenomenon, only later being introduced to the Western Civilization, and so this tendency influenced the cultural aspects and many values and standards of beauty imitated those of the West. Through this mechanism, many Oriental regions came to believe that the Western culture was superior to that of the East, and based on this cultural *toadyism* (a fawning flattery – *lipitsev meelitus*) many Asian countries traced and followed enthusiastically the Western cultural patterns rather than cultivating the Oriental uniqueness.

Because of this, the Western standards of beauty were accepted as absolute and universal. Recently, however, a new fresh movement has appeared which recognizes the Oriental culture as a novel and unique standard of beauty and cultural values. This change is not limited to the women’s beauty, but has been seen in many cultural patterns from Oriental fashion to spiritual ideology. This kind of a change that has a special interest in the Oriental culture is called *Orientalism*.

*“At first, it was very embarrassing to me to be praised for my single eyelids, cheek bones or flat nose by a designer or photographer because I thought it was my handicap. However, I realized what I should emphasize among the Western life size models.”*[3]. These were the beginning words of the famous Korean model Jang Yoonjoo’s speech after her trip to Paris. Nowadays, many fashion or media experts say that the Oriental Woman has a very mystical attraction.

The winner of the 2007 Miss Universe competition was Mori Riyo, a representative of Japan. The same year, a Korean representative, Lee Honey, ranked fourth and started a breakthrough in the barrier against Asians. In addition, in the Miss Intercontinental contest, which has always been more exclusive towards Asians and is held in Europe or South America, Korean representative Yu Hanna also made a great achievement by ranking second.

These prizewinners wore a unique and beautiful Oriental mask rather than the typical distinctive Western features. As many Asian women are winning great prizes in the world-famous beauty contests, it can be argued that standards of beauty are changing to accept more varied (and oriental) values. Moreover, in the West, the frequency of hiring Asian Models to advertise famous brands is gradually increasing. CHANEL, the world famous fashion brand, also recently ran an advertisement which used the Korean model Hye Park. This advertising trend is not limited to CHANEL, but can also be seen in *Salvatore Ferragamo* and *Balenciaga* brand commercials and many others.

### **3.1 Defined by the West - Negative Orientalism**

The word “*Orientalism*” first appeared in 1830s France and was a trend of Romanticism. It is a concept which has a relationship with the Orient and exotic oriental tastes. Orientalism involving interest towards the Orient has a double meaning. Edward W. Said, American culture critic (1935~2003), said the word “*Orientalism*” embodies the ideological view of the East held by the West. That is, as the subjective organizing concept of Orientalism is Western, the East is observed from a passive position, investigated and defined by the West. In other words, Orientalism is a scientifically systematized concept using rational Western logic.

Concerning the West’s increasing interest and fascination in Asian women, Korean journalist Hong Se Hwa wrote in his essay that the interest is born of Western men’s masochistic fantasy about the Eastern society. In other words, the seemingly obedient Oriental woman who is oppressed in Eastern regions stimulates the sexual fantasies of the Western men, and this mechanism romanticizes Oriental beauty. It can be seen frequently that Oriental women are sexually humiliated in famous Western art works of the past, such as “*the Slave Auction*” by Jean

Léon Gérôme [4], “*Odalisque and Slave*” [5], and “*Turkish Bath*” by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres [6].

Due to this, it is no wonder that Koreans are superstitious and cautious of the people of the West, since both sides are well-aware of the stereotypes that they have involuntarily created of themselves.

### **3.2 Admiring Lux – Positive Orientalism**

However, Orientalism has not always had an oppressive view of the Orient. Since ancient times, the West has held a notion called “*Ex oriente lux*” (*Light from the East*). As this slogan suggests, the West regards the East as the source of truth and wisdom. Therefore, Orientalism is a kind of admiration of the Oriental region and also perceiving the region as an ideal land. Orientalism also contains the desire to learn about Oriental spiritual values and their outcome, religion, ideology and culture.

The first literary occurrence of the yearning for the oriental spirit can be found in Thomas More’s “*Utopia*”. More set the location of the setting in “*Utopia*” in the Orient and described an ideal land which was full of dreams, mystery and peace. Thomas More’s recognition reflects West’s attitude towards Asia.

Recently, this kind of Orientalism has been highlighted even more. Max Weber, a German sociologist (1864-1920), said that the rationality of the West had nothing beyond the function of a tool. The ideology which concentrates only on rationality and utility cannot answer the question of ‘*how to live,*’ or ‘*why to live.*’ Moreover, according to the “*Times*” magazine, the number of Americans who meditate or seek refuge in the Oriental religion has doubled in the last 10 years.

West’s increasing interest in the Oriental arts and crafts is also related to a film trend that stirred in the early 1990s from the West. As the movies set in Southeast Asia such as “*The Last Emperor*” and “*Indo China*” gained popularity, the Oriental beauty which retains natural beauty without the drawbacks of deforestation or exploitation also gained

popularity. These trends are a few examples of a *positive* Orientalism which reflects and admires Asian nature, culture, study and spirit in a fascinating and praising way.

As previously stated, Orientalism has two main distinguishable phases. The first is the *positive* Orientalism, admiring and yearning for Oriental culture in a very respectful and considering way. The other, on the other hand, is the *negative* Orientalism which turns Oriental things into passive and disgraceful objects.

No matter how positive the trend of the modern Orientalism may be, it has its limitations which are imposed by the West. It is ironic that a culture which cannot be conceded by its native inhabitants can be conceded by the people overseas. Asia needs to concentrate on its own native culture, and this concentration and concession does not insist on the supremacy of the Oriental or the Korean culture. It accepts the fact that every culture has its own unique value, but while swimming along with the current, where Asia is being noticed, admired and taken up as a role model by the world, Asians themselves should find out what is Oriental about them - what is that unique identity that everyone else but them notices. Eventually, Orientalism will remain a cultural colonialism which cannot exist without the West.

#### **4. Rescuing Orientalism from the School of Said**

Edward Said's "*Orientalism*" was a cultural bombshell that has become a landmark — some would say a crater. Being one of the most popular and influential academic books ever written, it inspires condemnation and praise in equal measure. Published in 1978, "*Orientalism*" not only was a founding text for the academic fields of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, but also remains one of the most-cited works in what we can broadly call the "oppositional canon." It has been translated into 36 languages, and it continues to be cited, discussed and taught throughout the world.

This Orientalist discourse, Said stated, is racist, condescending, controlling, dehumanizing, feminizing and "essentialist" — which means that it asserts that there is a mysterious "essence," invariably religious, that defines the Arab world. That supposed essence, Said argued, is completely mythical and artificial, based not on actual knowledge or experience of the Arabs but

purely on the West's imaginary construction. In other words, Orientalism is an enclosed system, impervious to reality and indeed designed to ignore it.

Therefore, in its consideration of the East, the West has been accused of Orientalism, a theory developed by Edward Said to explain the way the West "constructs" the Orient by describing it and then ruling over it. Being Palestinian, Said certainly knows all about the negative side of this process, and consequently he and his followers have stressed the "ruling over" aspect of Orientalism.

A number of younger scholars have concluded that Orientalism in itself is not necessarily badmouthing, although they do not deny that Orientalism can and has been put to (negative) political uses, but they do argue that the problem posed is more complicated, and that in any event Orientalism is, as they put it, a "two-way street."

The problem is, as the scholars see it, that every human has the need to create itself a hard-core "other", someone simplified, consistent and preferably in all ways different than them, against which one can measure and compare itself. If the "other" is in all ways "inferior" to itself, then it is so much the better. Said's major question/argument was that "*who is the powerless or oppressed one and whether he can articulate a specific position*" [7].

The process of creating the significant Oriental "other" is, however, filled with tension. Orientalism can speak of respectful admiration, create the manageably picturesque or observe and pursue the erotic; but it can also embody invasion, imperialistic ambition, cultural genocide and the colonial status of the other.

Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotic, was originally one of the most lucid critics of Orientalism when "defining" the theory. However, his voyage to Japan, led him to question this opposition and employed in his book "*L'Empire des signes*", published in 1970 Orientalism as a *textual* strategy.

He constructed the significant term "others" (thoroughly insisting that he was never describing only Japan) and brought back the kind of approving wonder in Orientalism it had had until Said and his school downgraded it into just another conquering tool employed by the combative West.

Barthes made his main task to purge exoticism of the East of all the dirt that had been heaped upon by the West. In an essay on this subject, he wrote *“Exoticism is not (what) one could want to incorporate within oneself, but the acute and immediate awareness of an eternal incomprehensibility. Let us not pride ourselves on assimilating customs, races, nations and others; on the contrary, let us rejoice that we can never do so.”* [7].

Barthes also saw that the imperialistic Orientalism (of old times) defined the “others” not by what they *had* but by what they *lacked* compared to themselves; just what the “others” (the West) had that the East didn’t.

This kind of an idea forced the Western world (perhaps after a long time of selfishness) and the Westerners to actually think about themselves in a more critical way – self-criticism was something that the people became to practice and despite disliking it, it actually proved to help them to assess, understand and appreciate others different from themselves.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, I must say that even though this paper, as a whole, may sound a bit pessimistic about Korean Orientalism, I am personally quite optimistic about the future of how Koreans understand the so-called “*others*” and the Western world and its people in general. Koreans are very eager to learn and accept the differences of other people and cultures, so they set no limits to how much you want to educate them. The question lies more in the fact how to separate the truth, the positive from the lies, the negative.

Although, as I previously mentioned, Koreans are very much influenced by the news, gossip, lies - everything that are presented to them through Western TV channels. Their misconceptions of the West come mostly from television which is their number one source of information next to the Internet, and therefore it is quite logical to believe that as long as the West provides them with faulty, misleading or plainly messy information, then that is exactly how long the Koreans will believe it all and will be continuously and deliberately misguided.

We cannot, therefore, frown upon Koreans being too gullible or misled, because in my opinion, most of the negativity is created by the West itself; we can only blame the East being there to believe and trust, and West being misleading and wrong.

This feeding-of-wrongful-information is exactly why such worldwide institutions like UNESCO, MIZY and various youth centers almost in every field of life are organizing foreign culture classes (Western Cultural Studies) from kindergarten up to high school in association with local schools and other similar organizations [8]. These educative classes will be given by foreign teachers, in most cases by foreign exchange students studying/teaching in Korea and are ever-changing with different educational topics every year.

Moreover, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be organizing various cultural programs and tours to other countries in order to give the students more eye-opening possibilities and opportunities to get to know more about the world. In addition, the international members of organizations also visit these new Korean cultural centers in an attempt to get to know more about each other.

The awareness and uniqueness of the Western world is further emphasized through various international scholarships for foreign students, who go study in Korea and bring with them various cultural backgrounds that gradually help to change the homogenous environment of Korea and make it more diverse.

These are all great signs and big courageous steps taken by both the East and West towards writing off the negative misperceptions and misinformation about each other. After all, Orientalism and cultural differences can be seen as a *dialogue*, not as a monologue, where both sides have to improve oneself in order to see and accept “*others*”; and education its best antidote to overcome the gullibility, unawareness and ignorance; particularly “*the clash of ignorance*” as Edward Said has named it (AN: *The Clash of Ignorance here refers to the specific theory concerning sources of tension and hostility that are generally perceived to characterize the relationship between Western and Muslim societies. The theory emphasizes cultural ignorance as the primary source of conflict*) [9].

## References and further reading: (in alphabetical order)

- \* [8] Access to the MIZY Hand in Hand Youth Programs <https://mizy.net/eng/programs/?act=sub1> (Programs are renewed and improved every year)
- \* [4] Access to Jean Léon Gérôme's "*Slave Auction*" [http://allart.biz/up/photos/album/G/Jean\\_Leon\\_Gerome/jean\\_leon\\_gerome\\_109\\_slave\\_auction.jpg](http://allart.biz/up/photos/album/G/Jean_Leon_Gerome/jean_leon_gerome_109_slave_auction.jpg)
- \* [5] Access to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's "*Odalisque and Slave*" [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/i/ingres/ingres\\_odalisque.jpg](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/i/ingres/ingres_odalisque.jpg)
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