FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

Asia in the Mirror

Self-Representations, Self-Narratives, and Perception of the Other

EDITED BY
Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone,
Emma Lupano, Valentina Serra

"*Asia in the Mirror* offers a bold and necessary reframing of Asian studies by situating the continent not as a singular object of knowledge but as a site of intersecting gazes, representations, and epistemic dislocations. Drawing on postcolonial critique, comparative philology, and cultural theory, the volume triangulates self-perception, otherness, and Western reception to interrogate how Asia has been imagined, translated, and contested. In doing so, it provincializes Eurocentric methodologies, foregrounds plural and situated knowledges, and reorients the study of Asia as a dialogic, reflexive, and critically entangled enterprise."

—**Deven M. Patel**, University of Pennsylvania

As Asia's role in world politics becomes increasingly central, a deeper understanding of the cultural underpinnings of its global entanglements is urgent and overdue. What defines Asia from a cultural perspective? How has Asia represented itself and its diversity to both Asian audiences and different cultures? How has Asia represented other cultures and how, in turn, how has it been presented by them? How have contacts between Asia and other cultures shaped the continent? What is the role of postcolonial and decolonial approaches in enhancing our understanding of Asia and its relationships to other parts of the world in the past and in the present? *Asia in the Mirror* tries to address these questions through a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars in literary studies, philology, and media studies working across multiple languages and cultures.

ALESSANDRO ACHILLI is an associate professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Cagliari.

FIORENZO IULIANO is a professor of American literature at the University of Cagliari.

ANGELA DAIANA LANGONE is an associate professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of Cagliari.

EMMA LUPANO is an associate professor of Chinese language and culture at the University of Cagliari.

VALENTINA SERRA is an associate professor of German literature at the University of Cagliari.

ISBN 978-3-0343-5872-9

9 783034 358729

www.peterlang.com

Asia in the Mirror

FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

Jamsheed K. Choksy
General Editor

Vol. 3

The From Antiquity to Modernity series is part of the Peter Lang Humanities list.
Every volume is peer reviewed and meets
the highest quality standards for content and production.

PETER LANG
New York · Berlin · Bruxelles · Chennai · Lausanne · Oxford

Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone, Emma Lupano, and
Valentina Serra (eds.), with the assistance of
Mittal M. Trivedi

Asia in the Mirror

Self-Representations, Self-Narratives, and Perception of the Other

PETER LANG
New York · Berlin · Bruxelles · Chennai · Lausanne · Oxford

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.
The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

The volume is a key output of the "Asia in the Mirror" project funded by Fondazione di Sardegna (2021) and conducted at the Department of Literature, Languages and Cultural Heritage of the University of Cagliari, Italy.

Cover images: Erasmus Quellinus II, Jan Van Kessel the Elder - Allegory of Asia; Kitagawa Utamaro - Takashima Ohisa Using Two Mirrors to Observe Her Coiffure.
Cover design by Peter Lang Group AG

ISSN 2328-9236 | ISSN 2328-9244 (online)
ISBN 978-3-0343-5872-9 (print)
ISBN 978-3-0343-5873-6 (E-PDF)
ISBN 978-3-0343-5874-3 (E-Pub)
DOI 10.3726/b23295

Published by Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, USA
info@peterlang.com - www.peterlang.com

This publication has been peer reviewed.

Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Acknowledgments

The editors acknowledge the financial support of Fondazione di Sardegna, funder of the *Asia in the Mirror* project conducted at the Department of Literature, Languages and Cultural Heritage of the University of Cagliari (funding year 2021), and express their gratitude to Dr. Mittal Mahesh Trivedi, whose generous editorial assistance in the final part of the preparation of the volume has been crucial to its successful completion.

Asia in the Mirror: An Introduction

Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano, Angela Daiana Langone, Emma Lupano, and Valentina Serra

Asia(s), Europe(s), and Our Many Others

In 2008 Gayatri Spivak published a collection of essays under the suggestive—and somehow challenging—title of *Other Asias*. This title, along with the author's foreword, poses several questions about the very object of the book: what is Asia? Why does Spivak insist on the need for a plural noun so as to grasp (at least tentatively) that complex and multifaceted world which for centuries we have generally labeled as Asia? Spivak's book draws on the legacy of postcolonial studies, a field that from the late 1970s onward has reflected on how colonialism shaped the Western knowledge of the so-called third world and globally informed the cultural and political scenario once the former colonial states had obtained their independence. Her book interrogates the position and the role of the humanities with regard to a notion that even postcolonial studies had left untouched: the identity of the continent which, for centuries, has functioned as a rich repository for economies of both commodities and imagination. The very idea of many, contradictory Asias, whose nations and borders cannot even be defined, requires other approaches for its study, probably more imaginative and open to contaminations than the ones that have always been used in the field of humanities.

Spivak points out how bizarre our conventional definition of Asia must look like: Asia is the continent where exotic dreams and fantasies have been cast for centuries. Its extreme borders are, however, occupied by two "absurdities," she remarks, namely, Israel and Japan: "Japan has stepped into the Asia-Pacific for me. Israel sticks like a thorn in the side of other Asias" (11). A continent consisting of so many countries that hardly bear any resemblance to each other, and whose extreme borders are, rightly or wrongly, perceived as closer to the Global North than to other Asian countries, is still identified as a single, albeit differentiated, signifier. The origins of this signifier must be traced back to the history of empire-building, as Amitav Acharya points out: "Asia in many ways was an invention of colonialism" (Acharya 2010, 32). Such an invention goes back to ancient Greece's confrontations with its eastern rivals. On the other hand, Prasenjit Duara remarks that between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, alternative, competing ideas of Asia as a more or less unitarian cultural and political space were part of the struggle undertaken by Asian nations against European colonial powers, with intellectuals like Okakura Tenshin, Rabindranath Tagore, and Zhang Taiyan working to advocate the emancipation of Asian culture(s), and foregrounding the unity of Asia as an essential practical and epistemological instrument to achieve this goal (2010, 969).

The investigative process that Spivak develops in her essays originates in the idea of "othering" meant not simply as a synonym for plurality, but as an investment in epistemic discontinuity. This not only implies mobilizing multiple perspectives on that patchwork of countries, languages, and cultures that we still call Asia—in the singular. It also requires us to reflect on the gaps that our apparatuses of knowledge can neither fill nor bridge in their attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of the whole continent as a single epistemic object. These gaps are quite diverse: many Asias require just as many—and even contrasting or contradictory—approaches and methodologies. Many Asias also require multiple and diversified perspectives that question the supremacy of the Western apparatuses of knowledge and of their ability to provide interpretive and methodological grids for their objects. Finally, many Asias also pose a challenge to the privileged Western eye/I and its claims to universalism. There can no longer be a Western sovereign subject that looks at Asia and tries to provide it with its own rationale. First, because the West itself has discovered its inner contradictions, fractures, and lacerations that prevent any univocal and unidirectional gaze from being exerted upon any presumed object of knowledge. Second, because the numerous Asias that the Western gaze has for centuries tried to merge into one single object have, in turn, gazed upon the observing subject each and every time, questioning its

authority and its alleged universal stance. And finally, because these many Asias have also been looking at each other for centuries, their territories and cultures have continuously come into contact, and their maps have frequently overlapped.

Accordingly, the end of Western epistemic supremacy over the rest of the world has long been debated. In his introduction to the 2004 edition of the volume titled *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West,* Gerard Delanty reasons that the very idea of the West is now inadequate. In his view, "with the spread of Western civilization throughout the world, that civilization has ceased to be Western, but has become globalized" (Delanty 2004, 1). For Delanty, who approached these issues from the point of view of European Studies, "there is an unavoidable recognition that neither self nor other are easily defined" (2), which led him to pursue a kind of research that "addresses the possibility of a European–Asian cosmopolitanism that is not constrained by the dangers of Eurocentric 'Orientalism' or anti-European 'Occidentalism'" (2). Cosmopolitanism, however, risks reproducing the limits of old multiculturalism, implying the existence of a privileged subject of knowledge whose authority is grounded in a well-defined social and cultural background, someone who is usually white and upper-middle class, educated, and who possesses adequate financial and cultural capital.

This book originates from a project conducted at the University of Cagliari and a conference hosted in Cagliari in March 2024. Both the research and the conference intended to explore representations of Self and Other in specific contexts related to different areas of Asia. Our aim was to analyze the cultural, literary, and linguistic manifestations along with the conflicting dynamics occurring in the construction of complex identities, working from three different perspectives: how Asia represents itself, how it narrates the other, and how it is perceived as the Other. In doing so, the essays presented in this book and the project which has facilitated their composition and consolidation into a collective narrative share Delanty's plea for a new approach to Asia, Europe, and global cultural and political entanglements. Such an approach takes cognizance of both the need for a philologically grounded study of cultures in their national dimension and the transnational outlook that can enable a deeper understanding of their interactions and reciprocal influences. In conducting our project, we were well aware that our roots in European academia cannot but influence our scholarly approaches and our outlooks. While putting Asia at the center of our concerns, we have tried to avoid the risk of essentializing its nature both in the present and in the past. In dealing with these debates, we have thus constantly tried to observe and question our unavoidable familiarity with, and dependence on, Western scholarly methodologies. As Dipesh Chakrabarty states in his seminal work *Provincializing Europe,*

"European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody's heritage and which affect us all—may be renewed from and for the margins" (Chakrabarty 2000, 16). The subject matter of this book is accordingly a fertile breeding ground for fostering further reflections in this area.

A way out of the many contradictions we were grappling with while putting together this book was the use of the mirror as the metaphor for our research and, more broadly, for the numerous and conflicting perspectives with which this book aims to engage. For these many reasons we agreed that the mirror was the metaphor that best suited our efforts. The mirror has often functioned as a metaphor for new possible epistemic approaches, and not simply because it supplies a perfect replica of the "real" world. In fact, when we look at ourselves in the mirror, someone else is looming in the reflected image, both observing us in our self-discovery exercise and modifying the reflected picture of ourselves that others may apprehend. The mirror, thus, is the open field in which multiple gazes, coming from different and even distant subjects, converge and cross each other. When Asias look at themselves in the mirror, their reflected images also include other subjects that undermine that very Eurocentrism which for centuries has significantly affected our epistemic practices as both scholars and human beings acting in the world. Thus, the mirror denies the existence of an original Asia: any allegedly pure object of knowledge already finds itself marred by the very gazes that have produced it as an object of knowledge, bearing on its surface the traces of multiple projections, doubts, and inquiries. In *Sade Fourier Loyola*, Roland Barthes refers to the mirror as the instrument that the West has traditionally used to nurture its narcissism and strengthen its power position (Barthes 1976, 138). Yet, as Willard McCarty put it with reference to the use of this device in classical culture, "like metaphor itself, mirroring both identifies and separates" (1989, 162). The mirror, therefore, elicits interpretations but also questions the authority of any such interpretation. It creates connections and foregrounds distance at the same time. However, in line with the identities that they show and duplicate, the meanings and the effects of mirroring should not themselves be essentialized. Focusing on Kierkegaard and Rorty vs. Zhuangzi and Xunzi, two classics of ancient Chinese philosophy, Erin M. Cline has underlined the different meanings of the mirror metaphors in Western and Chinese thought, inviting scholars to avoid forcefully assimilating cultural trends that may reflect contrasting traditions and perspectives. According to Cline (2008, 317–18), while both traditions make use of the mirror as a metaphor, they do so in ways that call for

a heightened awareness of divergences in the sense and connotations that metaphors can acquire and engender.

Accordingly, mirrors reflect our objects of analysis reminding us of their differences and distance and of the technologies of (epistemic) power and sovereignty that have for centuries framed the images of the East that we have elaborated on and idealized as pure and original. This intersection of multiple gazes, we hope, could question the authoritativeness of the Western eye, in which what was once called the "third world" is still sometimes caught as an object of scrutiny. The mirrors that reflect the many Asias of our book, conversely, wish to "reduce the objectifying gaze that reconfirms the sovereignty" of the Western subject, triggering and encouraging "a process that is simultaneously provocative and pedagogical" (Chambers 2017, 92).

The use of the mirror as a metaphor for the relationships between the (Western) eye/I and its more or less objectified (Eastern) other is not new. Among the scholars who have pointed out how misleading such an approach could be, the significant words that Homi Bhabha wrote in the essay "Interrogating Identity" have repeatedly resonated with us at every stage of this project. In fact, Bhabha extensively comments on the position of postmodern thought with regard to the othering of Asia. He argues:

> What is profoundly unresolved, even erased, in the discourses of poststructuralism is that *perspective of depth* through which the authenticity of identity comes to be reflected in the glassy metaphorics of the mirror and its mimetic or realist narratives. Shifting the frame of identity from the field of vision to the space of writing interrogates the third dimension that gives profundity to the representation of Self and Other—that depth of perspective that cineastes call the forth wall. (Bhabha 1994, 48)

What we can define as the trouble with postcoloniality—whose complicity with poststructuralism Bhabha implicitly denounces—is the erasure of the language of the self. For instance, when I see the image of the Other reflected in the mirror I tend to ignore the context that the frame encasing it is *my* frame, and that the form in which the image of the other is reflected derives from, and still depends on, my epistemic grids. Bhabha's words encourage us to wonder about this crucial issue: whose mirror are we using to look at the reflected images of Asia or Asias? The awareness that we are inevitably translating what we call the real into our own language is, at the same time, the limit and the strength of the mirror as a metaphor for our epistemic effort. When we look at the numerous Asias we see reflected in the mirror we are also forced to look at the precariousness of our epistemic instruments, and, as a consequence, reminded of the partiality

of any attempt to fully grasp our supposed objects of knowledge. We are thus reminded also of the precariousness of our position as subjects whose knowledge is grounded in the north of the world and in the legacy of European tradition. While we cannot simply reject our situatedness as subjects and pretend that it simply does not matter, we can accept its partiality as an instrument that allows us to appreciate the pluriversal nature of the present world. In fact, a world that is tentatively understood as pluriversal rather than simply—and simplistically—global requires multiple perspectives to address the same objects and even to question and undermine itself. Any inquiry must bear the traces of the provisionality of its conclusions.

The extent to which the many differences at play in the book may be used to contrast Eastern vs. Western is up for debate and has been investigated with caution. What clearly emerges from such conversations is that scholarly metaphors and comparative studies should constantly question their own premises, methodologies, and conclusions. This awareness informs all the chapters of this volume, reminding us of the presence of the other(s)' gaze in any attempt at self-understanding.

Asia and Itself

In line with the three research questions that have guided us throughout the project, the book is divided into three parts, each of which adopts different points of view to analyze the image of Asia and/or its other(s) in culture, literature, and media. In the first part, titled "Asia and Itself" we explore how Asia has looked at itself, both at the microlevel of single states and (trans-)national cultures and as a continent and a space united by a certain extent of communality. Geographically speaking, this part includes the Arab world, contemporary China, and former-Soviet Central Asia.

"Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization and its Heritage in Modern Iraq. Perceptions and Modern Representations" by **Lucia Avallone** and **Giuliano Mion** questions how Iraq, an Arab country with a long-standing historical tradition of different cultures, perceives itself. Building on Assmann's notion of collective memory (1992), the authors show how modern Iraqi art and literature have used history to forge a national identity that conceives of Iraq as the direct and natural heir of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations.

In her contribution "Bāšā: New Uses of a 'Middle Eastern' Term," **Cristiana Bozza** analyzes the evolution of the word *bāšā* from an inherited honorific to new

meanings based on interviews with native speakers from the Mashreq countries. The history of this widely diffused term mirrors that of the Middle East over the last few centuries and has been shaped by both self-perception and the perception of the Other(s).

Natalia Francesca Riva's study "Telling Stories of the Communist Party of China: Constructing the Soft Power of Model Cadres" engages with how China represents itself through multiple-platform storytelling that is aimed at fostering internal socio-political stability and national unity. Based on Critical Discourse Studies, her chapter traces the "crafting, recrafting, and circulation of the collective memory" in the discursive construction of model Party cadres by looking at the case of the "Spirit of Jiao Yulu." The investigation shows both the constant need of the Communist Party of China for models that can justify its legitimacy and aggregate consensus, and the Party's commitment to ensuring that consistent themes and messages are spread across the media. By instrumentally using exemplary historical figures as an incarnation of the Party's heroic image—more generally, by telling stories of the CPC—the author argues that the Party builds collective memory that supports its governance and fabricates national identity, while also projecting a positive image of itself internationally.

The chapter titled "Comparative Analysis of Textual and Visual Contents on Saudi Tourism Instagram Pages" by **Elisa Gugliotta** aims to investigate Saudi Arabia's self-representation in its current tourist promotion policy, focusing on the distinct strategies used to engage both Arab and non-Arab tourists. Through a cluster analysis of social media pages, the author analyzes the communication strategies employed by the Saudi Tourism Authority to show how the country tailors its promotional content to address the different expectations of these two target audiences.

In "Locating Asia in the Russian-Language Poetry of the Fergana School from Uzbekistan: Hamdam Zakirov Between the 'East' and Europe," **Alessandro Achilli** points out some important theoretical, methodological, and practical issues of Russophone cultures from Central Asia. The chapter focuses on post-Soviet Russophone poetry from Uzbekistan, particularly the so-called Fergana School, whose aim was to make Uzbek culture communicate with Western modernism, while also distancing itself from Russian culture. Even though the poetry of the Fergana School relies on the Russian language and Western literary models, it is rooted in a space that is local and typical. The works of Grigorii Kohelet, Abdulla Khaidar, and Hamdam Zakirov analyzed in this chapter convey/introduce a contradictory image of Central Asia, torn between self-orientalization and the will to overcome its colonial subjugation to Russian and Soviet culture.

Achilli, therefore, reveals the mechanisms of meaning underlying the understanding of the fundamental role of the cultural interaction between Asia and Europe.

Asia and the Other

The second part, titled "Asia and the Other," questions the many ways in which Asian cultures have dealt with their several others in both the past and the present. With chapters that span a large and diverse set of epochs and places, from ancient China and India to the United Arab Emirates, this is the longest part in the entire volume.

Classical Chinese literary sources are at the center of the analysis in "'Otherness' in classical Chinese literary sources: the animal and the representation of the 'barbarian'" by **Francesca Puglia**, which explores the oppositional self-identification of the "Chinese" with respect to the peoples at the borders of the heartland of the Zhou 周 world first, and of the Chinese Empire later, after the unification in 221 BC. She observes that cultural diversity—that is, the cultural inferiority of others—is central to the Chinese perception of ethno-racial characteristics and is connected to the dehumanization of the barbarian peoples. But while the non-Han were lowered to a non-human level due to their behavioral and linguistic incompetence, this culture-based distinction fueled the inclusivity of the concept of "Chineseness." Unlike othering practices based on (un-changeable) ethno-racial characteristics, the cultural changeability of the non-Chinese people makes it possible for the barbarians to become sinicized (and therefore humans) under the influence of the superior Chinese culture. The study also highlights that this interpretation is rooted in cosmological theories, which influenced a strand of anomaly tales, a literary genre that developed in the declining phase of the Han 漢 Dynasty. In these texts, especially in stories of metamorphosis into humans, the animal is often found to metaphorically represent non-sinicized people seeking integration into Chinese territories through cultural refinement.

The chapter "Who is the Foreigner? Delimiting Boundaries Before and After the Encounter with the Greeks in Ancient India" by **Alessandro Giudice**, **Maria Piera Candotti**, and **Tiziana Pontillo** analyzes how the Greeks (and the Indo-Greeks) changed the Indian conception of the foreigner through inclusive strategies. The chapter focuses on the conception of the Greeks as foreigners in the Indian sources subsequent to the expeditions of Alexander the Great and the Indo-Greeks, on the basis of several layers of the *Mahābhārata* and the Dharmaśāstric texts. The authors analyze the importance given to the dharmic society

in the construction of the core of the kingdom and how the inclusion of foreigners became an urgent task. The texts analyzed show, on the one hand, a pluralistic vision of the realm in which the sovereign adheres to a different, more ancient, and more universal dharma that allows him to manage both the foreigners within his realm and the relationships with allied kingdoms. On the other hand, in some other, later texts, diversity becomes a moral parameter and its destructive potential in a rigidly regulated society based on the four dharmic classes, and social complexity is relegated to the rank of an impure mixture.

Continuing with another chapter on Indian literature in "Reconsidering *Mahābhārata* references to Rome and the Romans," **Diletta Falqui** discusses some instances from the *Mahābhārata* that appear to contain the Sanskrit adaptation of the toponym "Rome" and the ethnonym "Romans," and which may be identified as textual evidence for India's acquaintance with Roman culture. Indeed, scholars have demonstrated archeological evidence of flourishing trade relations between Rome and India from the first to the fifth century AD, also from the point of view of multicultural implications. However, there has been a notable absence of scholarly interest in the exploration of further textual and philological interpretations of the selected occurrences in the *Mahābhārata*. Falqui's contribution highlights a topic that may be seen as a corroboration of archeological evidence concerning the way in which Roman contacts were perceived in the ancient Indian textual tradition.

Daniele Beltrame's contribution "The Chinese Representation of Venice. Ideal and Real Visions in Chinese Sources from the Seventeenth through the Twentieth Century" offers an overview of the stages in the description of ideal and real Venice in Chinese sources, especially literary ones, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, as a means to summarize China's view of cultural and geographical otherness. The author identifies five trends in the way Venice is described, which can be linked to the various cultural contacts between China and Europe—missionaries and travelers to China, first, and Chinese writers exploring Europe, later. Due to their poetic atmosphere, the lyrical and picturesque vision of Venice and its Chinese counterparts (Suzhou and other Jiangnan water towns) emerges as the prevailing one even nowadays, especially in official and commercial sources, as well as in spontaneous ones, such as online travelogues. However, the development of a more realistic conception of distant countries and peoples, as well as the desire to re-establish China's position in the world, have instituted a polemical shift from the vision of Suzhou as "the Venice of China" to the vision of Venice as "the Suzhou of Europe."

Wenxin Jin's chapter "Call for Our Saint Jeanne d'Arc: Jeanne d'Arc in Late Qing and Republican China (from the 1910s to the 1940s)" moves from a similar

perspective—China's vision of the other as a mirror of the self—to analyze the interpretation and appropriation of Jeanne d'Arc in Late Qing and Republican China, in a period of political and social crisis that spans from the 1910s to the 1940s. Through the analysis of the name transliteration (which sinicizes the image of Jeanne with classical Chinese values) and the discussion of a variety of works about the French heroine published by Chinese authors of the time, Jin shows how the introduction of Jeanne d'Arc in China (via Japan) helped to awaken national consciousness and stimulate the people—in particular women—to fight for national liberation, serving as a model when local figures such as Hua Mulan would not suffice. However, despite its political function, the appropriation of Jeanne d'Arc did not help to introduce new, liberating values in the country. Rather than weakening Chinese traditional gender expectations for women and challenging the patriarchal framework, the local representation of the heroine only reinforced existing gender norms.

In her chapter "Travel Writing in Modern Sanskrit Literature: London, Paris, and Other Cities in the Mirror of Travel Accounts," **Lidia Sudyka** offers a compelling account of modern Sanskrit-language travelogues, focusing on both their rethinking of traditional Sansrkit travel literature, from which they significantly differ albeit with some elements of continuity, and also on the view of the West that emerges in modern Indian writers' physical and literary approaches to cities such as London and Paris. She analyzes texts written and published between the late eighteenth century and the early 2000s. As Sudyka puts it, unlike earlier Sanskrit literature, modern and contemporary Sanskrit travelogues no longer portray foreign travel as almost exclusively associated with feelings of fear and loneliness. It is now viewed as an opportunity to explore the world and enrich one's inner self.

The chapter titled "Encounters in West Asia: Perceptions and Self-Representations of Jordan and Saudi Arabia" by **Miriam Al Tawil** and **Fabian Spitaler** investigates self-representation in two Arab countries, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, using compelling data extrapolated through fieldwork in the region. The different strategies these two countries employ to create attractive perceptions for foreign tourists and investors reflect Western narratives in a game of mirrors.

Contemporary China, discourse, and media are the focus of the contribution of **Lutgard Lams**. In "Representing the Chinese Self and the Foreign Other in China's English-Language Press Editorials," Lams looks at the Chinese discursive process of Othering targeted at international audiences. In the context of China's public diplomacy efforts, Lams shows how the Chinese Self is ascribed a positive identity through the attribution of negative features to the Other. The study is based on a mixed-method approach that applies insights from sociology

and communication studies, narratology, and language and discourse studies to investigate the strategies employed by China's English-language press editorials to represent the Chinese Self and the U.S. Other during the first year of President Biden's term in office. The chapter highlights the fact that the consistent use—in both the case study and over time—of oppositional dichotomies and the projection of a hostile Other serve the purpose of legitimizing the Communist Party of China's lasting rule and allows China to take the moral high ground. Therefore, Lams argues, such positional superiority features not only in Orientalist Western discourses, but also in the discourse on the West that is articulated and disseminated through the state media by the Chinese leadership.

"The Literary Movement of Translation in the United Arab Emirates. Some Remarks on the Kalima Project" by **Angela Daiana Langone** focus on the Kalima Translation Project launched by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage in 2007. Based on the archives and introductions of works translated into Arabic, the author investigates the criteria used to select foreign works, the position of translated literature within the polysystem of the Arab Gulf, and the perception of the other that emerges from them.

Asia as the Other

The third part, titled "Asia as the Other" focuses on the fraught tradition of Western views of Asia, including chapters on seventeenth-century opera, modern legal culture, and American poetry.

The Western perception of Asia, particularly China, is explored in **Alessandro Tosco**'s contribution by focusing on theater during the Enlightenment. The analysis delves into the aestheticizing fashion of *chinoiserie* and "Chinese orphans" on stage that followed the first (partial) translation of a Chinese libretto into a Western language (1735) by the Jesuit missionary Joseph Henri Marie de Prémare (1666–1736). The study investigates how traditional Chinese (i.e., Confucian) values were received in Europe by looking at some of the many European playwrights and librettists such as William Hatchett, Voltaire, and Arthur Murphy who produced adaptations and rewritings of the libretto. Through textual examples and comparisons, the author shows that China was merely used at that time as an exotic backdrop for staging narratives imbued with familiar Western content. The chapter demonstrates that Confucian morality, rather than being approached and understood in its essence and in its context, has often been used as a mere means for Western culture to reflect on itself from a different perspective.

Mate Paksy's contribution "*Ex Oriente Lux, Ex Occidente Lex*: Three Ways to (Mis)understand Japanese Legal Culture" offers a unique perspective within the context of this volume. His chapter, which is based on a deconstruction of the Latin aphorism "Ex oriente lux, ex occidente lex," focuses on Western scholars' often awkward and partial attempts at understanding and classifying the Japanese legal system. Paksy foregrounds orientalist approaches in Western scholars' views, discusses the fraught issue of the "Asian" character of Japanese jurisprudence, and stresses the role of unwritten or customary law in Japan, which does not tend to be perceived as law at all by European standards.

In her contribution, which expands the focus to North America, **Anna Cadoni** analyzes visions of the East in Amy Lowell's poetry. Cadoni shows how Lowell's engagement with Chinese and Japanese poetry produces an exotic perspective on the representation of the Asian other through a collection of hybrid poetic expressions. This perspective entails both the construction of the Far East as a collection of stereotypes that characterized exoticism in Western poetry and a unique insight into the author's deployment of Orientalism as a significant tool to oppose what Lowell herself called the "artistic ignorance and gallant self-confidence of America." In her conclusion, Cadoni stresses how despite her interest for Asian cultures Lowell failed to consistently subvert Western stereotypes of Asia, including gender questions, which remained stuck in orientalist practices and discourses.

Finally, **Cristina Dozio**, in her chapter titled "Yusuf Idris Goes East: Asia as a Mirror for Egypt," aims to contribute to the study of Arab-Asian encounters by examining the journalistic travelogue *Iktishāf qārra* (Discovering a Continent, 1972) by the famous Egyptian writer Yūsuf Idrīs, written on his return from a trip to India and the Far East. The representation of Asian societies in this work is a mirror for Egypt: Japan in particular is presented as a source of inspiration for the renewal of Egyptian society.

Looking Ahead

The eighteen articles included in this volume address Asian self-perceptions, Asia's perspectives on its own several "others," and Western approaches to Asia from different points of view, employing a wide range of methodologies and focusing on diverse and often distant epochs and cultures. We are well aware that our exploration of Asia and its others, engaged in an exchange of gazes and refractions—the many mirrors of cultures, languages, histories, and identities mentioned in the title—is necessarily partial. No single work can account for the

network of encounters, translations, and negotiations that define Asia's relationship with itself and the world, nor do we think of our work as being fully comprehensive. Our efforts have been inspired by the words of a canonic figure in postcolonial thought, whose insights have taken on a new, strategically significant meaning to us. In 1982, the Vietnamese scholar and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha released *Reassemblage*, a film about the daily life of Senegalese people. The movie challenged the presumed objectivity of documentaries, questioning the authority of the narrating subject and disrupting traditional modes of representation. The words that open *Reassemblage*—later included in Minh-ha's 1992 book *Framer Framed*—resonate deeply with the aims of this volume: "I do not intend to speak about. Just speak near by" (Minh-ha 96). The *Asias* reflected within each mirror included in this book attempt to respond to this invitation. Each of the contributors in this volume have spoken "near by" the objects of their investigation, taking care to avoid any appropriation of the voices coming from their fields of inquiry, but constantly looking at, and being reminded of, the frames in which both subjects and objects of investigation are enclosed, if not entrapped.

We wish to conclude by going back once more to Spivak's *Other Asias*, whose insights have proved vital to our research. At the end of the essay that opens the book, while focusing on two important and interrelated questions, namely, those of language and singularities, Spivak mentions Italy:

> English is not the only public language on earth. We cannot learn all languages, but we can learn some. As of this writing, I have persuaded at least one Italian translator of Mahasweta Devi's fiction not to translate from my English version but to consult appropriate members of the local Bangladeshi-Italian community. (13)

She is likely referring to the first Italian collection of stories by Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Bangladeshi writer whose work Spivak has translated from Bengali into English and analyzed extensively. The collection she is probably alluding to, *La preda* (The Prey), was published in 2004 and translated from Bengali into Italian by Babli Moitra Saraf and Federica Oddera, under the guidance and supervision of Anna Nadotti, one of the finest translators working in Italy, who edited the whole volume. Though this episode may seem marginal, it carries significant implications. It signals a shift—much as a limited one and, as Spivak suggests, only following her own encouragement—in the perception of Asia in a country like Italy, which has often been considered peripheral and marginal to dominant global political and cultural dynamics. Acknowledging that Italian translators and editors should directly address the original languages, rather than relying on English as an intermediary, is not only a significant step

toward a renewed engagement with Asia and its cultures but also carries ethical and political responsibility toward them. This choice recognizes, on the one hand, that any second-hand, Anglophone-centric approach to knowledge about Asia proves to be inadequate and ideologically pernicious—as it still depends on the hegemony of the global and Anglophone north of the world—but, on the other hand, that access to Asian languages should no longer remain the esoteric privilege of a small academic elite. Our own attempts align with this shift, as we seek to challenge the dominance of anglocentric academic research and outreach by encouraging the engagement with Asian voices, texts, and perspectives from one of the peripheries of the globalized world.

Yet, what is even more prominent is Spivak's insistence on the concept of singularity. Her words have served as a blueprint for our research, as singularity embodies the fragile yet necessary (need for) balance between individual political positions and the broader global framework in which they are situated. She describes singularity as "the repeatable difference that beings share" (13). This concept becomes even more pivotal when Spivak attaches to singularity "the double bind of the call to rational universalism" (13), highlighting the tension between particularities and those structures of thought that wish to impose themselves as universal.

It is within this complex interplay—between singularity and rational universalism, between localized voices and transnational frameworks—that we hope this book will find its space. By bringing together diverse scholarly perspectives, linguistic traditions, and methodological approaches, we aim to embrace the productive tensions that emerge when the Asias we address in the volume are examined through multiple, intersecting perspectives. In doing so, we aspire to create a space that is neither wholly subsumed by the totalizing claims of global discourse nor confined to isolated, self-referential narratives, but that actively engages with the dialogic spirit that shapes the study of Asia in a global context.

As such, this book is not simply an examination of Asia in a global perspective but an exercise in critical reflection on the processes through which knowledge about Asia is produced, contested, and transformed. By interrogating these frames, we wish to foster a pluriversal understanding of Asias—one that hopefully embraces the multiplicities and the contradictions that frame knowledge about Asia in the present time. By bringing together these multiple perspectives, we hope this volume could encourage scholars and readers to keep exploring the nuanced entanglements between Asian voices and between Asia and the rest of the world. Literature, language, and cultural studies offer particularly rich perspectives for such investigations, as they reveal the ways in which identities are

continuously constructed, deconstructed, and reimagined across different temporal and spatial contexts. Through these disciplines, we can better understand how past and present Asias have been framed and how they have sought to resist external interpretations and define and redefine themselves.

Bibliography

Acharya, Amitav. 2010. "The Idea of Asia." *Asia Policy* 9: 32–39.

Barthes, Roland. 1989. *Sade Fourier Loyola*, translated by Richard Miller. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press (or. 1971).

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Chambers, Iain. 2017. *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Cline, Erin M. 2008. "Mirrors, Minds, and Metaphors." *Philosophy East and West* 58.3: 337–57.

Delanty, Gerard. 2006. "Introduction: The Idea of a Post-Western Europe." In *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, edited by Gerard Delanty, 1–7. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Duara, Prasenjit. 2010. "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69.4: 963–83.

McCarty, Willard. 1989. "The Shape of the Mirror: Metaphorical Catoptrics in Classical Literature." *Arethusa* 22.2: 161–95.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1992. *Framer Framed*. New York and London: Routledge.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2008. *Other Asias*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell.

Part One: Asia and Itself

1

Ancient Mesopotamian Civilization and its Heritage in Modern Iraq.

Perceptions and Modern Representations

Lucia Avallone and Giuliano Mion

Introduction

The present contribution[1] aims to investigate, within the general framework of the research project housing this book, the multiple possibilities of describing how one of the cultures settled in the Asian continent perceives and narrates itself. In particular, the focus of these pages is on how an Arab country with an extremely long-standing historical tradition of different cultures perceives and narrates itself. The choice fell on contemporary Iraq and the historical period that this contribution deals with is the twentieth century. More precisely, the chosen period begins in the 1950s, continues until Saddam Hussein's regime, and ends in the present day, when some data belonging to the post-Gulf war period will be tackled.

Present-day Iraq is a country that is beginning to find a relative socio-political stability with an economy that is painstakingly, but gradually, recovering after a long stagnation resulting from many years of external and internal conflicts, following first the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), then the First Gulf War (1990–91), and, finally, the Second Gulf War (2003). The country is multi-confessional, with Sunni

1 This work is the result of both authors' reflections and research. In the interest of practicality, however, Lucia Avallone is responsible for the second part while Giuliano Mion for the introduction and the conclusions.

and Shia Muslims, Chaldean and Syriac Christians as well as Mandeans, but also Yazidis, Bahai, Zoroastrians, and Jews. This multi-confessionalism goes along with a multi-ethnicity and multilingualism, because the population is composed of a majority of Arabs, but also Turkmens, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Shabak, and Circassians. This great complexity of the Iraqi population has been at the root of many sectarian conflicts that have developed as a result of successive wars in recent decades and, in particular, after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.[2]

In the Middle Ages, Iraq was the seat of the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) during which, as stated by Marr (2017, 2), the country "came into its own as the center of a prosperous and expanding empire and an increasingly brilliant civilization that drew on the traditions of its immediate predecessors, the Greeks and Persians, in forming the emerging Arab-Islamic culture." But it is also worth remembering that many centuries before Islam, during fourth and third millennium BC, Iraq was the cradle of the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian cultures which succeeded one another, all contributing to shaping its profile over the centuries and continuing until the present day.

The historical complexity of what is known as present-day Iraq coincides with a cultural richness that has rare counterparts, one of which is the case of Egypt that has been investigated by Reid (1997, 2019) retracing how the ancient Egyptian culture influenced the formation of the national identity of modern Egypt, as well as the connection of external intellectual forces, like that of the orientalists and foreign scholars who, after the Napoleonic invasion, influenced the psyche of the Egyptian elites all the way up to the era of Nasser. A similar phenomenon can be found in the case of Iraq, where the ancient Mesopotamian cultures have been used in order to raise awareness about the "golden" ages of the past and, consequently, create a national identity. But the most notable distinction between the Egyptian and Iraqi cases is that the use of the ancient Mesopotamian cultures increases alongside the rise of nationalism, and the acme of this phenomenon is represented by the era of Saddam Hussein. This doesn't mean that the Islamic past is sidelined, but instead one leaves with the understanding that in the ideological and political agenda, the pre-Islamic glories are projected in a sort of natural continuation with the Abbasid culture until modern times, as if there were no dividing lines between the completely different historical periods. Architectural elements, artistic works, monumental arts, and even literature, altogether contributed to regaining the past in order to glorify it and reshape the present according to a sentiment of continuity of the past, as if the flow of time was suspended.

---

2 For a general overview on the interconnections between ethnicity and conflicts in Iraq, see, for example, Ulack (2015).

In reconstructing the dynamics of identity that led to the valorization of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations in modern Iraq, the observations included in these pages have been inspired by the general theoretical framework of the theory of cultural memory, as proposed by the late German Egyptologist Jan Assmann in a long series of works related to collective memory and the construction of the identity of a community. Assmann's approach is particularly suitable in our case, because his research, for which one could refer mainly to Assmann (1992), is grounded on the study of cultural memory in antiquity primarily focusing on ancient Mesopotamia, Near East, Egypt, and Greece. Assmann's approach represents a sort of refinement and an application of the notion of collective memory that was originally conceived by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the first half of the twentieth century.[3] The following is a summary of a couple of concepts related to cultural memory through which we can effortlessly understand the subject matter investigated in this study.

In order to be able to refer to the past, it must have entered as such in the consciousness of a social group, and this process presupposes at least two elements:

(1) the past must not have disappeared completely, there must be some kind of documentation;
(2) this documentation consists of testimonies that must exhibit distinctive features when compared to today.

The historical memory of the past events of a social group plays a large role in shaping its collective memory. While this may seem simple and obvious enough, the direct and indirect implications are nonetheless significant. When a social group insists on a specific interpretation of its shared past and strives to cultivate and pass on its memory, it performs an act of cultural memory. And collective memory is created precisely on this act. When a social group insists on a specific interpretation of its shared past and strives to cultivate and pass on its memory, it performs an act of codifying an accepted history. It is this precise act which creates cultural memory. This mechanism develops self-awareness of one's community and, thus, ends up forming the basis of a cultural identity. The social group which practices such an act of cultural memory is considered a community of memory. The opposite of an act of cultural memory is forgetting or removing one's past. This damages the collective memory to the point of compromising it, and in this way, the social group is deprived of the mechanisms that regulate its cultural identity. Its excessive weakening further encourages its assimilation by external forces,

3 See Halbwachs (1925, 1950), which are the works that inspired Jan Assmann.

condemning it to progressive decline. This brief summary gives a quick idea of why acts of cultural memory are so important to build a community of memory. A social group which identifies as a community based on shared memory constructs an image of itself that attenuates internal differences and insists on cohesion around a shared system of values, beliefs, and experiences, while emphasizing the differences between self and the other.

All these elements and dynamics are very relevant for a country that wishes to emphasize its national identity, and we have examples of this from all over the world in different historical periods. In modern Iraq, we find such phenomena over the nearly forty years of rule by the Arab Socialist Baath Party (1968–2003), when the ideology propagated by them (for which see Sassoon 2011) was used to facilitate the internal cohesion and the cultural experiences of the country. The interconnections between ideology and the representation of cultural memory in Iraq have been the subject of a fair number of studies (see Baram 1991); however, these analyses don't go as far as the Gulf War or even the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Therefore, the observation of such phenomena confirms that, in modern Iraq, the past was continuously reorganized according to the frames of reference of the present—memory proceeds in a reconstructive manner, narrating a past to justify its continuity with the present. Moreover, while this can be marked with monumental works or art, literature can also play a part. One of the most notable examples of this is the novel *Zabība wa-l-malik* [Zabība and the King], officially authored by Saddam Hussein and published in 2000. The story is set in the time of ancient Babylon and deals with the love between a girl, Zabība, and a king. In this plot, the splendors of the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations serve as a backdrop that magnifies the country's greatness, and the relationship between the two protagonists is nothing but a metaphor of contemporary Iraq being threatened by the United States and the Western countries. As we are going to see in the following paragraphs, monumental and fine arts also played crucial roles in the construction of this sense of identity. But can these phenomena be considered acts of resistance to the external pressure?

Origins and Development of Modern Art in Iraq: A Historical Overview

In order to more fully comprehend the contribution of fine arts to the evolution of a modern Iraqi identity rooted in the rich history of its civilizations, we

will examine the origins and developments of these arts in the twentieth century. The arts of painting and sculpture have in fact a relatively recent history in Iraq, with the first significant examples of production emerging during the early years of World War II. Nevertheless, by the 1920s an interest in fine arts and crafts was clearly evident, as attested by an exhibition held at the Suq Ukadh Festival of Poetry in 1922 and the erection of the first public monument in Baghdad dedicated to the British General Frederick Stanley Maude[4] in 1923. As Shabout (2009, 25–6) posits, a significant shift in conceptualizing the commitment of the artists emerged during the early 1930s, as art began to be regarded as a profession. This marked a rupture with previous artistic practices, paving the way for the advent of modern art in Iraq.

An important art exhibition was held at the Industrial and Agricultural Fair in Baghdad in 1931, with the participation of teachers and talented students, and three years after its inauguration (1936) the Music Institute in Baghdad was expanded to include sections for visual arts and drama. In the same years several artists undertook studies abroad in Europe, remaining there until the outbreak of World War II when they were compelled to return to Baghdad. During the war period the Institute of Fine Arts was founded (1941), with Faiq Hasan (1914–92) as its director. At that time Iraqi artists had the opportunity to become acquainted with Polish artists stationing in the country with British military forces. A strong bond was formed between Polish and Iraqi artists to such an extent that the modern art pioneer Atta Sabri (1913–1987) called them "brothers in art."

During the war years, artists trained in Europe, especially in Paris, frequented Baghdad's cafés, both giving and participating in lectures, as well as presenting their works in exhibitions organized there and in other Arab countries such as Lebanon and Egypt (Lenssen 2024, 92). A more modern approach thus pushed Iraqi artists to engage in experimentation and search for a national artistic identity and a plurality of individual artistic identities. In 1941, the Art Friends Society [*ǧam'iyyat aṣdiqā' al-fann*] was established as the first art association registered at the Ministry of Interior in Iraq.[5] On November 14, of that year, the Society held its inaugural exhibition of artistic works. Young Iraqi artists, including Jawad Salim (1919–61) and Faiq Hasan, were encouraged to depart from the

4 This statue celebrated Maude as the liberator of Iraq from Ottoman domination, but it was dismantled in 1958, following the dissolution of the Iraqi monarchy, as an act of erasing a historical record associated with the domination of external forces.

5 The group included painters, sculptors, architects, and representatives of other arts. Among them were Akram Shukri, Faiq Hasan, Jawad Salim, Atta Sabri, Issa Hanna, Hafidh al-Drubi, Abdel Qadir al-Rassam, and Haj Muhammad Salim (see al-Khamis 2001, 22).

academic approach of their predecessors and embrace an art that transcended the naturalistic, realistic representation of reality, to penetrate "beyond objects and phenomena to seek their true essence," employing styles such as Cubism and Expressionism (al-Khamis 2001, 22–3).

In the aftermath of World War II, the Iraqi government continued to provide financial and logistical support to artists within the country, as well as facilitating their participation in cultural missions to Europe and international exhibitions. Significant examples include the Cairo International Exhibition (1947), the exhibition at the UNESCO Conference in Beirut (1948), and the exhibition of Arab artists in Rome (1953).

The 1950s represent a pivotal moment in the development of fine arts and their crucial role in shaping the distinctive features of modern Iraqi identity. This was due to factors already mentioned, including the government's support for artists, the emergence of cultural institutions and events, and the wartime climate of openness to foreigners. As Jawad Salim observes, "during the four-year period when Paris and Europe ceased to make beautiful work," Baghdad continued to work, despite the difficulties (Lenssen 2024, 113).

It is noteworthy that several important cultural institutions were established prior to the Second World War, among them the Salam Library (1920), the Baghdad Antiquities Museum (1926), the Public Library (1929), and the Institute of Fine Arts (1939). Subsequently, the Baghdad Symphony Orchestra (1944) was founded, followed by the Popular Theatre Company and the Baghdad Film Studio in the post-conflict era. Within this dynamic setting, in a decade which also culminated in the overthrowing of the monarchy and the establishment of the Iraqi Republic (1958), the country saw the establishment of some key institutions such as the Modern Theatre Company (1953), the first TV broadcasts (1956), the Iraqi Artists Society, which was led by the architect Muhammad Makiya (1914–2015), and the University of Baghdad (1957). Several art and literature magazines also emerged, such as *al-Ṣibā* [Youth], launched by Nizar Salim (1925–82) in the late 1930s, and *ʿAštarūt* [Astarte],[6] in the early 1940s, by Jamil Hamudi (1924–2003) which were both handwritten productions. It is significant that the title of the latter publication refers to one of the names used in ancient Mesopotamian civilizations for the female deities of rebirth and regeneration. The same artists also founded two other journals: *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīṯ* [The Modern Thought] in the

6 Only two issues of this magazine have survived, and they bear witness to its usual content: comments on art trends, articles on cultural phenomena, reviews of local exhibitions, sections on gallery containing examples of works (Lenssen 2024, 107).

mid-1940s, headed by Jamil Hamudi[7]; *al-Waqt al-Ḍāʾiʿ* [The Wasted Time] in 1946, headed by Nizar Salim (Alsaden 2018, 175–6). The latter was established in collaboration with al-Waq Waq Café,[8] which served as a meeting place for artists and writers concerned with the status of art and literature and committed to ideas of political and cultural revolutionism. Despite its relatively brief existence, the café made a substantial impact on the formation of a contemporary Iraqi cultural identity (Caiani 2013, 38–41).

Within this context of rich cultural initiatives, the testimony of the Iraqi writer Naim Kattan, an exile in Canada, is worthy of consideration. In his recollection of the years spent in Iraq after World War II, he mentions collaborating with writers and artists such as Nizar Salim, Khalid al-Rahhal and Samir al-Shaikli, and describes meetings in Baghdad cafés during which they discussed the creation of a new Iraqi culture, beginning with the recognition of the country's cultural greatness and importance. This culture was to be promoted across borders and disseminated through an Iraqi magazine. It was thus that the avant-garde magazine *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīṯ* came into being (Joudar 2020, 178–9).

At the same time, artists who had been trained in European schools and later had held positions in Iraqi cultural institutions,[9] gathered mainly in three groups: (1) the Société Primitive,[10] led by Faiq Hasan, who abandoned the practice of studio painting in favor of painting *en plein air*; (2) the Baghdad Group of Modern Art,[11] founded by Jawad Salim and Shakir Hasan al-Said, whose intent was "to reassert national self-esteem and help build a distinctive Iraqi identity" through

---

7 He is considered a pioneer of the "Arabic Hurufiyya" artistic school and was later the founder of the magazine *Ishtar—Revue internationale pour une compréhension meilleure entre l'Orient et l'Occident* (1958).

8 At the time, Baghdad was home to numerous cafés where intellectuals gathered, fostering a vibrant cultural phenomenon known as "café culture." They included al-Waq Waq Café, the Swiss Café, the Brazilian Café, Yasin Café, Shatt al-Arab Café, al-Baladiyya Café, the Parliament Café, al-Muʿaqqadin Café, al-Shabandar Café, al-Zahawi Café, and Hassan Ajami Café.

9 For example, Jawad Salim spent a year studying in Florence (1938–39) and a year in Paris (1939–40), and later he resided in London between 1946 and 1948. On his return to Iraq, he headed the sculpture department at the Institute of Fine Arts (1949) and also worked at the Iraqi Museum on the restoration of artifacts and statues from the Assyrian and Sumerian periods.

10 The group was subsequently renamed the *Ǧamāʿat al-ruwwād* [Pioneers' Group] and comprised artists such as: Ismail al-Shaikly, Issa Hanna, Zaid Salih, Mahmud Sabri, Jawad Salim, and Lorna Salim.

11 The group was known in Arabic as *Ǧamāʿat Baġdād li-l-fann al-ḥadīṯ* and included Lorna Salim, Nizar Salim, Naziha Salim, Faraj Abbu, Rasul Alwan, Fadhil Abbas, Muhammad al-Husni, Khalil al-Ward, Abd al-Rahman al-Gailani, Khalid al-Rahhal, Muhammad Ghani Hikmat, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Shakir Hasan al-Said (al-Khamis 2021, 24).

the art (al-Khamis 2001, 24); and (3) the Impressionist Group gathered around the figure of Hafiz Drubi (1914–91).

> As nuclei of ardent groups, their [artists'] work arouses constant argument, often violent controversies about "humanism," "social responsibility," "Iraqi-ism," apart from the larger over-all question of tradition. (Jabra 1961, 7)

Established in 1943 around the concept of original (*bidā'ī*), intuitive art, the Société Primitive held the first exhibition in December of 1950. At that time, the group also changed its name to *Ǧamā'at al-ruwwād*, and the call for a more active role of the artist in society, initially proposed by one of the founders, the painter Mahmud Sabri (1927–2012), also gained importance. Another significant contribution to the discourse on art was made by Jawad Salim. He promoted the concept of *istilhām al-turāṯ* [heritage inspiration], whereby inspiration from the ancient heritage, combined with a commitment to renewal, could be exploited in a way that would lead to the realization of a contemporary aesthetic (Shabout 2020).

In fact, in the 1950s, modern visual arts benefited from a surge in popularity, with a renewed interest in primitive art, daily life, folklore, and last but not least, the heritage of ancient Iraq, revisited with the aim of expressing modern life and thought in society. In particular, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art constituted the most considerable driving force behind the genesis of a national modern art movement. In fact, the cosmopolitan spirit that had previously dominated the Société Primitive gave way to a new vision of art represented by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art and its new style that was to become emblematic of Iraqi art and identified distinctly as Iraqi. The first group of artists was not concerned with achieving a style other than the Western one, although the content of the paintings often had local vistas as its subject. The latter group, on the other hand, proposed new forms of representation. As Jabra argues: "they called for a historical consciousness that would make of the whole of Babylonian and Arab tradition the matrix from which their style should emerge" (Jabra 1988, 167–8).

The 1958 coup d'état that brought an end to the Hashemite monarchy paved the way for a series of additional coups, in 1963 and 1968, that resulted in the ascendency of the Baath Party, which remained in power until 2003. During this period, there was a transition from art which aimed to express the artist's vision of autonomy within the context of a national agenda to art that was confined to a specific space and served the interests of the regime in glorifying the spirit of sacrifice for the nation. In fact, the artists who were active during the Baath regime took part in the project of building an Iraqi art school, received commissions for

large-scale art works, were recruited to positions in the Ministry of Culture, and participated in exhibitions organized by public institutions.

From the early 1950s until the 1980s, a substantial number of artists drew inspiration from the themes of ancient Mesopotamia, receiving favorable reviews in the press and specialist periodicals. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the 1968 coup d'état, the General Institution for Archaeology at Iraq's National Museum held an exhibition of modern art, with the aim of fostering "the deep continuity between artistic creation of pre-historic eras, the Islamic era, and our [Iraqi] modern artists" (Baram 1990, 71).

The establishment of the Iraqi Artist Society in 1956 as a forum for the presentation of works by artists affiliated with collectives or engaged in independent practice proved to be a pivotal initiative in the advancement of the fine arts. This is evidenced by the considerable number of artists' contributions and the Society's exhibitions, such as those held at the Mansur Club (1956–58) or at the Royal Olympic Club in Adhamiyya (Gupta, Takesh 2021, 69). The remarkable success of the Mansur Club exhibitions signified a novel approach to the dissemination of art in modern Iraq, prompting a discourse on the pursuit of quality art and a meaningful engagement with the public (Alsaden 2018, 168).

The Revolution of 1958 thus marked the advent of a new era, one characterized by a renewed sense of optimism and an aspiration for a fresh start. This was reflected in the arts, as artists sought to express their ideas through artworks that often-enjoyed patronage from the regime and reflected emerging social ideals.

> Culture, as defined in the report of the Eighth Regional Congress of the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, was part of the development strategy of the Party and therefore, of the Iraqi government (El-Basri 1980, p. 12). Writers, artists, intellectuals and journalists were to be attracted to the Revolution, in order to help spreading its goals (Arab Ba'th Socialist Party 1974, p. 256). Cultural centers were opened abroad, in London and Paris for instance. The Iraqi Cultural Center in London was especially proactive: besides numerous exhibitions, it issued a lavish periodical, *Ur*, dedicated to the arts and literature, edited by the renowned artist Dhia Azzawi. In 1976, an exhibition of contemporary Iraqi art was shown in Paris, at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (*Art irakien contemporain*, 1976). (Naef 2012, 477–8)

It is worth mentioning that only a few years before the revolution, the artistic innovations that were maturing within the different groups of artists also led to the formulation of manifestos, such as the ones developed by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951 and 1955. These were closely linked to the theoretical perspective on art that emerged during the Baathist period, which emphasized the

significance of national identity within the context of Iraq's extensive history of civilizations spanning millennia. These manifestos put the emphasis on the local character, which was later termed the "heritage character" (Naef 2012, 477). The following is an excerpt from the 1951 Manifesto:

> We thus announce today the beginning of a new school of painting, which derives its source from the civilization of the contemporary age, with all the styles and schools of plastic art that have emerged from it, and from the unique character of Eastern civilization. In this way, we will honor the stronghold of the Iraqi art of painting that collapsed after the school of Yahya al-Wasiti, the Mesopotamian school of thirteenth century AD. And in this way we reconnect the continuity that has been broken since the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols. [...] We, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, hereby declare the birth of a new school of art for the sake of our civilization, and for the sake of universal civilization.[12]

In relation to the 1955 Manifesto formulated by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the well-known Palestinian writer and artist refugee in Iraq, the concept of belonging to a nation with a rich history with origins dating back to ancient civilizations was also highlighted. Moreover, the use of innovative techniques for portraying the lives of individuals and incorporating local motifs was promoted. It was a matter of interpreting the present while simultaneously drawing upon the tools and concepts of the past (Jabra 1988, 167–8). The group was described as including painters and sculptors, distinguished by their individual styles and conscious of their intellectual and stylistic links with the wider world of art beyond Iraq. It was their contemporary perspective that would result in the emergence of new forms in Iraqi art and a distinctive identity (Salim 1977, 102).

The Baghdad Modern Art Group was not a conventional school; rather, it was a movement that was trained in Europe or by European artists. The thematic and stylistic influences of this group derived from Eastern sources (Streithorts 1958, 20). It provided a forum for experimentation in painting and sculpture, with Jawad Salim representing the pivotal figure around which the group coalesced. Salim's contributions were not limited to his own works, but also included ideas about art in general. In his volume devoted to modern Iraqi painting, Nizar Salim (1977, 103) cites Arnold Hottinger's assertion that the original work of Jawad Salim constituted a point of confluence and equilibrium between modern art

---

12 The excerpt is drawn from "Bayān Ǧamā'at Baġdād li-l-Fann al-Ḥadīṯ al-Awwal," published in *al-Adīb* 10, 7 (July 1951): 52, translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseiny and published in Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout 2018.

and ancient oriental traditions. His oeuvre and his conceptualization of art for Hottinger respond to the question he poses at the commencement of his essay on the artist: "How might one maintain an individual sense of self in the context of modern life? This question encompasses many of the challenges currently facing the Middle East. What is the significance of this assertion?" (Hottinger 1964, 61). For Hottinger (1964, 64), Jawad Salim

> was one of the rare artists capable of mastering two domains together, that of modern art and that of Oriental art. He was able to bring them together, to create a living synthesis, and from it an original work which, if it represents a new world for the East, is no less the Eastern world itself.

Like many other artists he participated in a season of large-scale state-commissioned artworks. In fact, he was responsible for the decoration of a public monument that still marks the landscape of Baghdad today: *The Freedom Monument* [*Naṣb al-Ḥurriyya*], the wall structure which was designed by the architect Rifat Jadirji.

Figure 1.1: The Freedom Monument in Tahrir Square.

The monument symbolically narrates the Revolution and is composed of a series of images to be read from right to left like the Arabic script. In a modernist style that evokes the technique of a Mesopotamian bas-relief, Jawad Salim

represents both the struggle for freedom and historical legacy. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the monument's meanings, we have highlighted some of the symbols occurring in the sculptures crafted in bronze and bearing specific messages:

- The ethnic, cultural, and social composition of the population represented through the depiction of Arabs and minorities as peasants in Sumerian and Assyrian dress.
- The rebellion against the domination of the monarchy and foreign control represented by a wild, unruly horse that has thrown off its rider.
- The ox, an element often present in ancient Iraqi imagery, which symbolizes strength, fertility and wealth.
- The image of martyrdom which has been a pivotal theme in Iraqi Muslim tradition and is also a symbol of suffering shared with Christians.
- Two Iraqi women symbolizing the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, with a young girl representing their tributaries.
- A woman bearing a torch who signifies freedom, in accordance with the ancient Greek style.
- The ancient Mesopotamian symbol of the sun disk, which indicates the return of light after darkness.

These motifs demonstrate the artist's historical perspective, which encompasses both the present and the past. The significance of the work extends beyond the political and cultural context in which it was created. Jawad Salim's modernity also transcends the fact that the monument was associated with the regimes in power during the Baathist era and the rule of Saddam Hussein. Even today, it continues to convey messages that speak to the whole of humanity.

Two additional monuments were commissioned by the Prime Minister, Abd al-Karim Qasim, to commemorate the 1958 Revolution: *The Post-Revolution Mural* by Faiq Hasan and *The Monument to the Unknown Soldier* by Rifat Jadirji. The latter was dismantled and replaced with a new monument by Khalid al-Rahhal in 1983, during Saddam's regime.

Furthermore, Faiq Hasan was tasked with painting historical panels, including *The Battle of Qadisiyya* (636 AD, between the First Caliphate and the Sassanid Empire), which has not survived to this day, and *The History of Iraq*, where the artist depicted three historical phases that are considered to be the roots of modern Iraq: the Sumerian, the Assyrian, and the early Islamic.

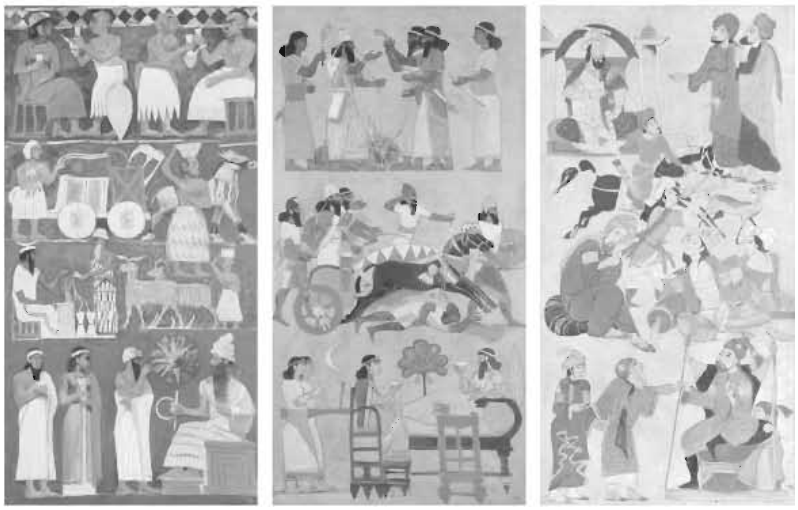

Figure 1.2: Faeq Hassan, *The History of Iraq*.

In portraying this triptych, the artist employed artistic conventions and stylistic elements typical of the referenced periods. These include Sumerian and Assyrian bas-reliefs, which were imbued with a sense of vitality and realism through the artist's painting technique, as well as Persian miniature art.

The oeuvre of another artist, the celebrated sculptor Khalid al-Rahhal, one of the most prominent figures in Baathist art, exemplifies a form of creativity intimately intertwined with the history of Iraq. Among his works is *The Monument of the Journey* [*Naṣb al-Masīra*], located in the square in front of the Iraqi National Museum, representing the Baath Party as a ship on which three human figures are traveling (the monument was dismantled in 2005 as part of a de-Baathification campaign). One of the figures is a boy looking toward the museum, symbolizing the historical and cultural roots of his country. The ship is adorned with a series of bronze decorations that evoke motifs from ancient Mesopotamia, including a bull standing over a fallen warrior, a lion hunting a deer, and the goddess Ishtar. Al-Rahhal was also commissioned to paint *The Hanging Gardens of Ancient Babylon* and was the author of the marble group *Mother and Son*. In the 1980s, under the rule of Saddam Hussein, he was appointed to create the much-discussed *Swords of Qadisiyya* (also known as *The Victory Arch*), two huge twin arches consisting of swords held by the hands and forearms that reproduce the ones of the Iraqi president.

It is worth noting that the link with history, both in terms of a revolutionary present and a promising future scenario, is also firmly established with the Islamic

Golden Age. Indeed, among the monuments of al-Rahhal, the bronze bust of the Abbasid Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, who founded the Round City of Baghdad in the eighth century, is of particular significance (the monument was partially destroyed by a bomb blast in 2003 and completely dismantled in 2005). In 1972 the statues of the poet Abu Nuwas and the medieval artist Yahya al-Wasit were created by Ismail Fattah al-Turk, who would create the iconic Martyr's Monument in 1983.

To cite a few more important examples of works of art that place the distant Mesopotamian past in continuity with modern Iraq, the two panels commissioned by the Sheraton Hotel in Baghdad from Hafidh al-Drubi depict one life in Hatra and the other in Babylon. In the mid-1970s, Muhammad Ghani Hikmat created a marble and bronze group entitled *A Child, a Mother, and Hammurabi's Stele*, which refers to the great Babylonian lawgiver (the Hammurabi's code inscriptions on the stele are in Arabic). The same sculptor is also responsible for monuments situated in public places in Baghdad that recall several medieval themes (historical or fictional) and feature, for instance, the figures of *Shahrazad and Shahrayar* (1971) and *Kahramana*, the wife of Ali Baba (1971), as well as the Abbasid poet *al-Mutanabbi* (1977) and *The Fisherman and the Genie* (1982). In more recent times, he created the monument entitled *Saving Iraqi Culture* (2010), which represents a five-armed

Figure 1.3: Muhammad Ghani Hikmat, *Saving Iraqi Culture*.

giant rescuing a metaphorical broken cylinder bearing the cuneiform inscription "here writing began" and symbolizing the culture that is at risk of being destroyed.

In the decades preceding the 2003 invasion, there was a notable shift in the role of public monuments in defining a national identity that was increasingly aligned with the state ideology. Some minor artistic expressions, such as posters and stamps, reflected this, coinciding with the cult of the commander-in-chief, President Saddam Hussein. In this context, it is unsurprising that Hussein was also portrayed in association with Nebuchadnezzar, even in the garb of an ancient warrior and alongside Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, the Muslim commander who opposed the European crusades (like Saddam, al-Ayyubi was a native of Tikrit).

Conclusions

In the first pages of the present contribution, one of the pivotal questions consisted in determining whether the artistic phenomena that have been considered within these pages could be interpreted, in the frame of Iraqi nationalist ideology, as acts of resistance to external pressures. Giving a definitive and unique answer is incontestably hard, but it seems quite obvious that the efforts in shaping a national artistic canon can be interpreted as a tool used for accelerating the dynamics of identity and otherness.

The word "canon," here, may sound strong, but it is not used randomly. In Assmann's approach, in fact, the formation of a canon, or "canonization," is mainly intended in the sense of the process of collection of texts belonging to the past that form a sort of syllabus of cultural knowledge. Aside from the literary domain, a canon, intended here in a wider sense, represents a model of behavior for the community of memory and it turns out as one of the most influential strategies for the transmission of cultural memory.

As happened in similar cases, in Iraq too, the production and transmission of non-contemporaneity contributed to the formation of that cultural memory. The cases of both *The Freedom Monument* and *The Victory Arch* are undoubtedly emblematic, because they consist of examples of monumental art that can excellently show the intersections between different historical periods and that crystallize in the present the demonstration that are ideally interconnectible.

The first one embodies the link between the "antiquity" and the "golden age" of the Islamic civilization, that is, between ancient Mesopotamia and the Arab culture: the rhetorical device consists in the representation of an event from contemporary history, the so-called Qasim's revolution, through both

Assyro-Babylonian themes and the readability of the image according to the directionality of the Arabic scripts.

The second celebrates the transition from the Sasanian empire to the Islamic age, a monument that alludes to the famous ancient battle of Qadisiyya: the rhetorical device here consists in the theme of the swords, to which the Islamic tradition, starting from the famous Prophet's sword (the so-called *Ḏū l-fiqār*), attributes the symbolism of religious and military power, but also in the choice of the site and the location, next to the Museum of Gifts to the President and the performing art center.

As we have seen, this general artistic attitude, which was reflected not only in monumental art but more broadly in all creative expressions of painting and sculpture, was an integral part of the ideology and politics of Baath which, over the years, favored and foraged those artists who made ancient Mesopotamia their source of inspiration. The demonstration occurs clearly in many documents, as we have seen for example in the 1951 Manifesto, which announced without mincing words, we could say almost messianically, a new artistic movement "for the sake of the civilization." And here we find a partial answer to our pivotal question, as the manifesto evokes the notion of civilization and the urgent need of its preservation.

These phenomena can be easily viewed as acts that contribute to build a cultural memory and permit shaping a national identity that conceives modern (Baathist) Iraq as a natural and evident result of all the previous historical periods. History is not re-written but is bent according to the needs and requirements of national(-ist) politics.

When looking at all these artistic expressions, the one-dimensionality of existence seems to be suppressed and life acquires a sort of twofold temporality, namely a life flowing in two coexisting different times, which persist through all stages of national evolution.

This twofold temporality is usually a prerogative of religions, in which it is not crucial to recognize that some celebrated remote episodes are truly historical or merely mythical, but it is important to entrench them in the consciousness of the believers and to make them relive cyclically in the social practices of the present, especially when implementing rituals. Instead, in our case this temporality doesn't depend on religious aspects and remote episodes don't relive cyclically in rituals, as the Baathist atmosphere had imposed a secular mentality, and ancient episodes revived through their static crystallization in creative works.

The everyday was nothing but the continuation of a past that the ideology of national identity wanted to persist.

Bibliography

Al-Khamis, Ulrike. 2001. "An Historical Overview 1900s–1990s." In *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art*, edited by Maisaloun Faraj, 21–40. London: Saqi Books.

Alsaden, Amin. 2018. "Alternative Salons: Cultivating Art and Architecture in the Domestic Spaces of Post-World War II Baghdad." In *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, edited by Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan, 165–206. Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut.

Assmann, Jan. 1992. *Das kulturelle Gadächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C. H. Beck (English translation, 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Baram, Amatzia. 1991. *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968–89*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Caiani, Fabio, and Catherine Cobham. 2013. *The Iraqi Novel*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

El-Basri, Abdel-Gawad Daoud. 1980. *Aspects of Iraqi Cultural Policy*. Paris: UNESCO.

Gupta, Huma, and Suheyla Takesh. 2021. "Prelapsarian landscapes and post-diluvian politics in mid-century Iraqi art." *Journal of Contemporary Iraq & the Arab World* 15 (1&2): 67–83.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1925. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1950. *La mémoire collective*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Hottinger, Arnold. 1964. "Jawād Salīm." *Fikr wa-fann*, 3: 61–4.

Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim. 1961. *Art in Iraq today*. London: Embassy of the Republic of Iraq: 1–10.

Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim. n.d. "The Monument in Memory of the Glorious Revolution of July 14th." *Modern Art Iraq Archive*. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://artiraq.org/maia/items/show/36>.

Joudar, Ahmed. 2020. "'The cultures of Orient and Occident must be together in the character, imagination, and ideas of the writer': A Conversation with Naim Kattan." *Canadian Literature* 239: 178–82.

Lenssen, Anneka. 2024. "Baghdad Kept on Working: Painting and Propaganda during the British Occupation of Iraq, 1941–45." *Getty Research Journal* 19: 92–121.

Marr, Phebe, and Ibrahim al-Marashi. 2017. *The Modern History of Iraq*. New York: Routledge.

Naef, Sylvia. 2012. "Not just 'For art's sake': Exhibiting Iraqi art in the West after 2003." In *Writing the Modern History of Iraq Historiographical and Political Challenges*, edited by Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco, Hamit Bozarslan, 475–500. Hackensack, N. J.: World Scientific.

Reid, Donald Malcom. 1997. *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Reid, Donald Malcom. 2019. *Contesting Antiquity in Egypt: Archaeologies, Museums, and the Struggle for Identities from World War I to Nasser.* Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press.

Salim, Nizar. 1977. "L'art contemporain en Iraq: Livre premier: La peinture." *Milano: Jaca Book.*

Sassoon, Joseph. 2011. *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party. Inside an Authoritarian Regime.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shabout, Nada. 2009. "A Dream We Call Baghdad." In *Modernism and Iraq*, edited by Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, 23–40. New York: Columbia University.

Shabout, Nada. 2020. "A New School of Painting: The Baghdad Group for Modern Art." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEna7xbbMFg>

Streithorts, Tom. 1958. "Jewad and Lorna Selim." *Al-Kulliyah: The Middle East Forum* 33 (1): 20–2.

Ulack, Chris. 2015. "Demography of Race and Ethnicity in Iraq." In *The International Handbook of the Demography of Race and Ethnicity*, edited by Rogelio Sáenz, David G. Embrick, Néstor Rodríguez, 367–84. Dordrecht: Springer.