

LOST HORIZON:
H.P. BLAVATSKY AND THEOSOPHICAL ORIENTALISM

Christopher Partridge

The premise of “Orientalism” is that there is an essential polarity between East and West. The taken-for-granted, often naïve acceptance of this opposition within particularly the arts, the media, and popular culture has not only shaped Western understandings of the “other,” but has fostered an attitude of difference and the exotic. This, in turn, has often led to and is supported by the construction of caricatures and unsophisticated, homogenous understandings of Oriental religions, cultures, and societies: Images of meditating Buddhist monks in saffron robes filtered through a gentle mist of incense, news reports of enraged Muslims burning American flags, advertisements for “Turkish Delight” confectionary depicting images of tented Bedouin royalty, a majestic camel train making its way across rolling dunes, the eroticism of the East described in the writings of the British Orientalist Richard Burton (1821–1890) and depicted in paintings such as John Fredrick Lewis’ *The Harem* (c. 1850), John Auguste Dominique Ingres’ *Le Bain Turc* (1862) and Sir Frank Dicksee’s *Leila* (1892), and the mysticism of gravity-defying martial artists in recent films such as *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Hero* (2002) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). All these narratives and images are common in the modern West and, again, all trade in stereotypes, fostering a perception of the exotic and the essential otherness of the Orient. Perhaps the starkest statement of this relationship is Rudyard Kipling’s “Ballad of East and West”: “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat...” It is this ideological division of East and West, the historic Western curiosity with the Eastern “other,” and, often, the concomitant Western hubris it engenders, accompanied by misunderstanding and a sense of duty to convert, civilize, and modernize, that is referred to in contemporary discussions of Orientalism.

This understanding of the East has, of course, also shaped the self-perception of the West. Whereas the East tended to be understood as mystical, exotic, and frozen in religious history, its spiritualities and philosophies being more or less unchanged for millennia, and therefore

enlightened and barbaric in equal measure,¹ the West was understood to be technologically advanced and progressive. Again, there was a sense in which many in the West felt that they had a moral obligation towards the Orient, to educate and to encourage its moral advancement.

Not all Westerners, however, were as convinced of Western superiority as many of those embedded in Christian culture. Seeking access to occult truth, some Westerners, convinced that their own traditions had little to offer, turned to the Orient for enlightenment. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society and its most important thinker, provides a paradigmatic example of both this Occidental “othering” and the turn to the Oriental “other,” in that she was fascinated by the possibility of excavating a hidden knowledge protected from modernity in a timeless, Oriental realm of wisdom and spirituality. She understood Theosophy to be the “Secret Doctrine of the East” (Blavatsky 1893, vol. 1: xvii), the teaching of the Oriental Masters of Wisdom (Blavatsky 1968: 289; Pert 2006: 109). Moreover, she was not alone in romanticizing the Oriental premodern (see Partridge 2004: 77–78), in that many occultists of the period believed that, if such Wisdom existed, it would have to have been concealed, protected from the corrosive rationalism of modernity and Christian hegemony. This, for example, is the rationale for the *The Book of Dzyan*, knowledge of which, Blavatsky claimed, formed the basis of her *Secret Doctrine* (1888; Maroney 2000). It is, she argued, one of several sacred and ancient manuscripts, written in the esoteric language of “Senzar,” and protected from the profane world by initiates of a “Great White Brotherhood” based in Tibet. This “chief work... is not in the possession of European Libraries. *The Book of Dzyan* (or ‘Dzan’) is utterly unknown to our Philologists...” (Blavatsky 1893, vol. 1: xxii), who were, it appears, rather skeptical regarding its existence.² However, the point is that, the nineteenth-century Orientalist and esoteric context meant that it was almost inevitable that “the trans-Himalayan esoteric knowledge which has been from time immemorial the fountain-head of all genuine

¹ For example, at the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893 – one of the principal speakers at which was Theosophy’s Annie Besant – while there is a clear fascination with the otherness of the East, *The Chicago Tribune* (21 September, 1893) writing of India as “the land of glorious sunsets... inhabited by peoples differing from each other almost as variously as their numbers, in language, caste and creed,” also reports that the “defense of polygamy among Mussulmans gets hisses” (reproduced in Chattopadhyaya, 1995: 87–88).

² Alvin Boyd Kuhn, for example, notes that Max Müller is reported to have said that, concerning *The Book of Dzyan*, “she was either a remarkable forger or that she has made the most valuable gift to archeological research in the Orient” (1930: 194).