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Go East, Young Man

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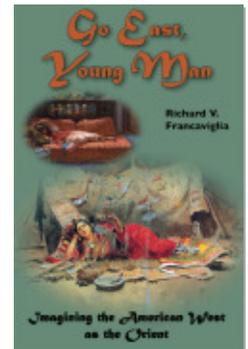
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Full Circle

Imagining the Orient as the American West

"California's economy is increasingly tied to Asia. And China is a huge part of this trend."

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, "Selling California,"
radio address, November 19, 2005

AS HISTORIAN DAVID WROBEL RECENTLY NOTED, what we know as the West today was not really the West at all throughout much of the nineteenth century. Instead, it was widely perceived "as a global West, as one developing frontier, one colonial enterprise, among many around the globe."¹ In this conclusion I would like to portray the Orientalized American West as a fragment of the larger United States. Like portions of the earth's crust that are part of the American mainland but were once fragments of Europe, Africa, and Asia, this region has a complicated past that can be understood only by tracing material back to its original source areas. As human artifacts, those tectonically shifted cultural fragments are in some ways even more difficult to decipher than pieces of the earth's crust. They are both idiosyncratic—the result of individual perception—and collective in that they coalesce in a popularly constructed set of shared images. Moreover, to complicate things, these images change as soon as they become recognizable. The truth is, they are in a constant state of flux.

Even today, when the West seems so exceptionally American, why does Orientalism constitute such a strong undercurrent in the region's art, film, literature, and tourism? My search through hundreds of examples found in primary sources confirms Wrobel's findings that people originally viewed the American West as something other than the West we know today because that West hadn't yet been imagined into existence. Moreover, Orientalism is still a component in how the region is viewed today because we have not finished shaping that region through the creation of surrogate identities.

In this conclusion, however, I would like to explore something that is in itself both characteristically American and yet somewhat subversive—namely, that the Orientalization of the American West was not only one stage in the process by which a broader American identity was formed but also a stepping stone to our exporting that American West to far corners of the globe. By Orientalizing the West, we made it familiar to ourselves by making it the exotic, by giving it a recognizable though strange identity, and we could in turn now use this Orientalized West to spread our typically expansive American culture to similar parts of the world, namely the Near East and Far East, and make the exotic familiar. At first glance, this may seem paradoxical because the Orientalized West seems to take a backseat to twentieth-century visions of a West filled with cowboys and Indians, miners and pioneers, and the like. But upon closer examination, a subtly (and not so subtly) Orientalized West is a component in spreading a western American mystique worldwide. How this is occurring represents one of the most exciting subjects for scholar and citizen alike, that is, anyone interested in the American West and its worldwide influence.

First, though, consider Governor Schwarzenegger's quote above in historical context, that is, part of the United States' long tradition of engaging the Orient as an extension of American expansion. At first we looked directly east—that is, across the Atlantic Ocean—to accomplish this. In the 1780s and 1790s, the Barbary Wars along Africa's north coast in the late eighteenth century represented America's first encounter and conflict with Islam. These conflicts occurred when American sailors were taken for ransom, and they represented the United States' first foreign policy challenge. However, we also always looked westward toward the east. The earliest American national movement westward, which began at about the same time, involved the agenda of reaching Asia. In the June 1853 issue of *Knickerbocker Magazine*, an anonymous writer asked a geopolitical question that resonates today. "What part have we of America in the Orient?" Although the United States was not yet considered a serious player on the world stage at that time, the writer was sure that destiny would involve his country in the East. As that writer put it, "No power but the ALMIGHTY can prevent the Democratic element of America from making its impress upon the Orient."² That same year, American warships under the command of Admiral Perry steamed into Edo (now Tokyo) and—under the banner of "friendship" and "commerce"—demanded an audience with the Tokugawa Shogunate. This bold act effectively opened American commerce with the Orient, but the subtle threat of those modern, steam-powered vessels should not be overlooked. Truth be told, winning the

US-Mexican War in 1848 had emboldened the United States and made the world its oyster. The pearl, as it soon made clear, was the Orient itself. During the nation's centennial in 1876, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a hymn to the process of a peaceful and profitable engagement, which includes the lines

Thou, who has here in concord furled
 The war flags of a gathered world,
 Beneath our Western skies fulfill
 The Orient's mission of good will,
 And, freighted with love's Golden Fleece,
 Send back the Argonauts of peace.³

What historian William Goetzmann called "the irresistible western drive to the Far East" became, as he so eloquently put it, "part of the whole romantic urge to reach out to the remote corners of the globe; the belief that somewhere, over the horizon, beyond the ken of ordinary rational man, lay some sublime truth, and the possible meaning of human existence." These possibilities, as Goetzmann concluded, "became the vogue among romantics both in Europe and in America." In addition to numerous factors that contributed to a fascination with the East—including "tradition, history, fable, philosophy, Christianity, mystery and science," Goetzmann added yet another—"the economic motive." This made the attraction to the East, to introduce a relevant dichotomy, both "rational and irrational." It also ensured that the Orient would be a vital element in American westward expansion.⁴ In a sense, effective American expansion into Asia depended in part on its well-established tradition of Orientalizing American soil itself. The Orient, after all, was subliminally part of the nation's own fabric now. In other words, the Orientalization of the western American frontier created and constituted a bridge, so to speak, that facilitated the nation's expansion into the Orient.

Orientalism is far more than solely aesthetic or cultural, then, but also had considerable potency as a subliminal force in geopolitics. This could work both culturally and politically and be manifested internally as well as internationally. As Islamic art historian Holly Edwards observes, in the mid-nineteenth century, American Orientalism was "a therapeutic response to changing circumstances rather than a static intellectual stance on a monolithic phenomenon."⁵ The word "therapeutic" suggests that Orientalism was a fix or solution to conditions or maladies—rapid urbanization, social instability, increasing commercialism, and the like—and that certainly had some validity. It was Orientalism, after all, that could offer escape from the complications and uncertainties, as well as from the boredom and malaise, of everyday life.

However, Orientalism could do much more. As Edwards further observed, Orientalism also provided “images of universality when regional or sectional differences were divisive and painful,” adding that “the Orient may have served to focus public attention on larger horizons and more inclusive ‘truths.’”⁶ Whether or not regional tensions were a factor in American Orientalism’s increasing popularity at this time may be debated, but an important spatial and temporal aspect is quite significant: this vigorous Orientalism flowered at exactly the time that the western American frontier was being explored and colonized—that is spread, and not only in the American West but also to Asia.

It is widely recognized that Orientalism played a strong role in European expansion into both the Near East and Far East, but the degree to which the tropes of the *American* frontier were involved in this process is virtually unknown. Consider, though, the case of early nineteenth century Russian career foreign service officer Aleksandr Griboedov, who assisted Russian colonial expansion into Persia in the 1820s. According to Russian literature scholar Angela Brintlinger, the ambitious Griboedov was both a Russian Orientalist and would-be literary hero who called upon America’s growing frontier literature to assist that expansion. Brintlinger notes that James Fenimore Cooper’s evocative works about civilization moving into wild, open frontiers served as a yardstick for Griboedov’s literary imagination and geographical ambition. Griboedov, however, was not only an incurable romantic, but egomaniacal in his belief that his life of adventure eclipsed all others, even the characters that Cooper employed to push the American frontier westward. As Griboedov immodestly put it in 1828, when he helped Russia expand its frontier south-eastward in steppe and desert, “forget your Trapper and Cooper’s *Prairie*, my living novel is right before your eyes and a hundred times more interesting.” Griboedov’s living novel, as he called it, was both intoxicating and exhilarating. Unlike a regular novel, it would not be published but rather lived. In this living novel, Griboedov fantasized that “something new happens to me which I never considered, never guessed might occur.” This sentiment was not only romantic but also prophetic. After Russia defeated Persia, and its diplomatic delegation arrived in Teheran, resentment mounted as something Griboedov never guessed would occur was about to: on January 30, 1829, with little or no warning, an angry mob whipped into a frenzy by a firebrand mullah tore the entire unarmed Russian delegation, including Griboedov, to pieces in the street.⁷

The United States offered Josiah Harlan (1799–1871) as a counterpart to the Russian diplomat who would have been feted for his part in expanding the frontier into Southwestern Asia, had a cruel Persian fate not intervened.

Harlan traveled to the Orient in 1820 after being exposed to adventure stories as a youth in Pennsylvania. As a young man who did, indeed, go East, ex-pat Harlan hired on as a surgeon in the British East India Company, and found himself face to face with the real Orient. Like his American homeland, Harlan was imaginative and ambitious—an adventurer in the nineteenth century tradition. By the 1830s, the restless Harlan found himself involved in political intrigue in the desert-mountain empire of Afghanistan. Impressed by the potential to create something of an empire for himself, Harlan took up arms in raging battles for control there. In 1838, Harlan became the Prince of Ghor, a landlocked mountain province in central Afghanistan. His combination of romanticism and intelligence was infectious, and his exploits intrigued Americans back home. In fact, it was Harlan who reportedly lobbied Jefferson Davis to import Afghan camels to the American Southwest as a way of helping the U.S. take control over that similarly arid portion of the West. Above all, it was Harlan's political exploits that riveted Americans' attention, providing a glimpse of his nation's future role in Oriental exploits. Although Harlan escaped the gruesome fate that awaited Griboedov, he was ultimately unable to maintain his grasp on central Afghanistan. Disillusioned, Harlan returned to the United States. In 1871, he died in what soon became the undisputed center of American Orientalism—San Francisco. Harlan himself was all but forgotten, though his role was immortalized in Rudyard Kipling's 1888 short story *The Man Who Would be King*—a tale of colonial ambition gone awry that was made into a feature-length film of the same name by John Huston in 1975. It was not until the search for Osama bin Laden in the post 9/11 War on Terror that Harlan's story was rediscovered and told anew by journalist-writer Ben Macintyre in his 2004 book, *The Man Who Would Be King: The First American in Afghanistan*.

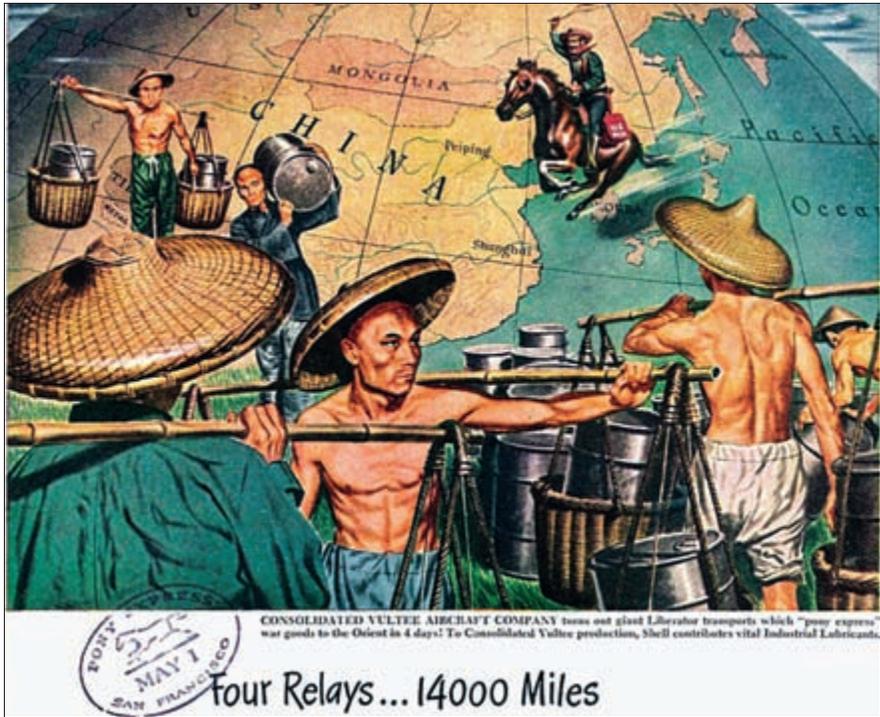
In turning east rather than west, Harlan proved that the adventurous, entrepreneurial westering spirit of Jacksonian America could be applied to the Orient as well as the American West. As Griboedov further demonstrated, American depictions of the frontier could serve as inspiration for those hoping to colonize other frontiers, namely the Orient. That was true in the nineteenth century, but does Orientalism today play any role in international affairs? More specifically, what lessons can an Orientalized American West offer about the way American culture diffuses to the real Orient? A closer look at popular culture here suggests that by Orientalizing its own frontier, the United States found Americanizing Oriental frontiers easier. This, of course, is the flip side of a well-worn coin. I am not the first to suggest that the American western experience would ultimately be part of the United States' expansion as a world

power. In fact, that premise was central to Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" presented in Chicago at, as historian John White has astutely pointed out, the exact same time as Chicago's Columbian Exposition. In building on such visionary, if controversial, ideas, I shall now show that an Orientalized West is part of the complex process by which American values find a more or less natural stage abroad, namely in the Middle East and Asia. I hasten to add that although Americans may find this natural, peoples of the Orient may have differing views on the subject.

Although it is now widely agreed that the United States' rise as a world power and the rise of the American Western as an art form were not coincidental—after all, both happened at about the same time and ostensibly involved good triumphing over long-entrenched evils such as despotism—I here seek to explore how the American Western is used in American encounters with the Orient and its peoples. I am referring to something different here than the more or less natural tendency for an American in the Middle East in the nineteenth century to compare people there to the Santa Fe traders or Indians he knew in the West. I have in mind something far more significant, some might say troubling, and that is the more recent tendency to transform the real Orient itself into the American West in popular culture.

Even though the vision of the Far East as an extension of western frontier expansionism dates back at least two centuries, it could only become a real possibility given developments in the Second World War. The vision is beautifully portrayed in a 1945 advertisement for Shell Oil Company (fig. 10-1). Using the metaphor of Pony Express relays, the *U.S. News and World Report* advertisement's map features a horse and rider galloping toward the Chinese mainland, hell-bent-for-leather. This metaphor is both symbolic and pragmatic in that Shell here touted the importance of its motor oils to the aircraft flying supply routes during the Second World War; these supplies would help keep China free of the menace posed by Japan. This ingenious advertisement rests on that familiar western icon of horse and rider, contrasted with the exotic and traditional people of the Orient. In this advertisement, though, China is part of the Western frontier of democracy. The message here is unity with the Chinese in the effort to stop another Asian power, the sinister Japanese.⁸

This advertisement was no mere eccentric vision but rather reflected an increasingly attractive prospect after the War. In 1946, for example, Northwest Airlines ran a provocative ad in *Time* magazine promoting its soon-to-be-initiated air service to Tokyo, Shanghai, and Manila. These venerable cities were recently brought back into the travelers' reach following the War, and



Courtesy Jeff Stone, Atlington, Texas

Fig. 10-1. A 1945 Shell Oil Company advertisement in *U. S. News & World Report* uses the frontier metaphor of the Pony Express relay to “westernize” the Orient.

they had tremendous economic and cultural appeal. While touting its modern “4-engine, 44-passenger luxury service,” the airline also reminded prospective travelers that this amounted to “fulfilling America’s historic dream of a short-cut to the Orient . . . [the] *Northwest Passage!*” In emphasizing the historic dream, the airline juxtaposed two earlier methods of travel—an old sailing vessel of the type that would have been used by European powers searching for the fabled passage in the 1700s, and a covered wagon from America’s westward-moving frontier. These contrasted with the then-modern four-engine, propeller-driven Stratocruiser airliner, but the message was explicit. Northwest Airlines was helping a westward-looking America fulfill an early dream, to reach—and ultimately have an impact on—the Orient. Another 1946 advertisement by Northwest Airlines uses only the prairie schooner juxtaposed with the modern four-engine aircraft to confirm the validity of a long-held dream: “You were right, Pioneers . . .” the ad claims, the route connection from the United States to Asia via the “NORTHWEST PASSAGE” is indeed a “short cut to opportunity!” (fig. 10-2).

**Still the route of opportunity...
NORTHWEST PASSAGE**

You were right, Pioneers... it is a short cut to opportunity!

Here along Northwest Passage stand twenty-six of America's top cities...centers of vast industrial production...tremendous resources of low-cost hydro-electric power...gateway ports for air travel over both oceans.

Northwest flies clear across this top tier of the country overnight. New low fares compare favorably with the cost of any other

form of transportation. Make reservations early...and travel in swift comfort along Northwest Passage!

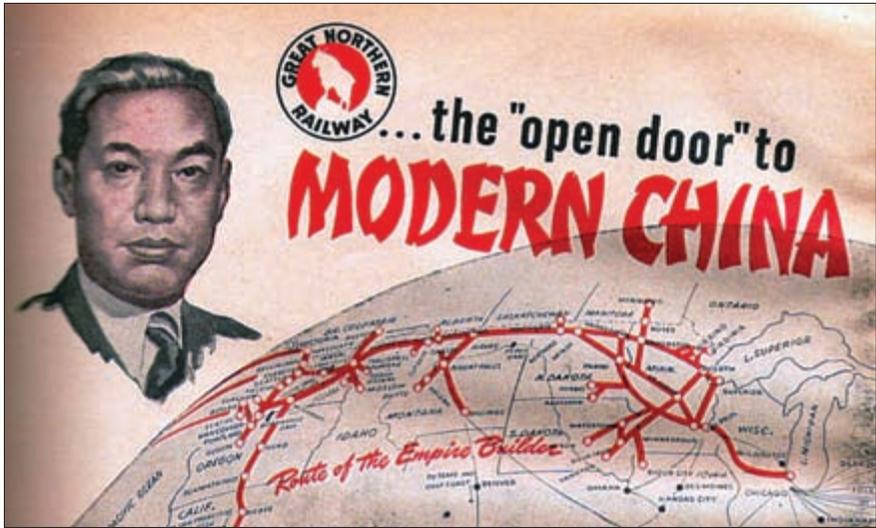
NORTHWEST AIRLINES

**NORTHWEST PASSAGE
Coast-to-Coast**

Courtesy Jeff Stone, Arlington, Texas

Fig. 10-2. In 1946, Northwest Airlines used this advertisement in *Time* magazine to resurrect the fabled "Northwest Passage" as a way of linking West and East in modern times.

The railroads also participated in this westernization of the Orient, although their power would rapidly diminish as rail passenger ridership dropped off and trucks siphoned off considerable freight traffic in the 1950s. In 1946, though, the Great Northern Railway was still optimistic. It ran a revealing advertisement in *Newsweek* magazine touting its connections to the Far East (fig. 10-3). This ad featured a map of the Northwest with the Great Northern's bright red lines extending off that map toward Asia, where a drawing of a Chinese man dressed in a western suit was positioned to signify China. Noting that the Great Northern Railway was now "an 'old hand' in Pacific trade," the advertisement bore the familiar "Rocky" mountain goat



Courtesy Jeff Stone, Arlington, Texas

Fig. 10-3. In a 1946 advertisement that appeared in *Newsweek* magazine, the Great Northern Railway used a map of its system as the “Open Door to Modern China.”

followed by the words “the ‘open door’ to MODERN CHINA.” Significantly, the latter was written in the “Chinese style” letters so commonly seen on everything Chinese American, from fireworks packages to menus. The purpose of the advertisement was to announce that “something big and important is happening in China . . . the awakening of new ideas of China’s 450 million people.” That idealism lasted only long enough to be shattered by the rise of Chinese Communism in the late 1940s, but it revealed more than a century of interest in stimulating China’s millions into “real”—which is to say Western—development.

In 1959, Hawaii and Alaska became states, in effect finishing the United States’ geopolitical growth westward toward the Orient. Alaska had its own Oriental mystique, for it shared a border with (and was once a part of) Orientalism-inspired Russia. Hawaii—recognized as an East-West crossroads since the nineteenth century—was home to native peoples of East Asian and South Pacific origin and thus was literally the Orient in the popular mind. Although the annexation of these two territories can be seen as a fulfillment of an American Orientalist impulse, the geopolitics of the Cold War was also a factor. As the 1960s would prove, America did indeed have an “impress” to make on Asia. It would come in the form of covert and overt military action, and also through the kinder and gentler vehicle of cultural exchange, including the arts, literature, and popular culture.

In a sense, the Western novel and Western films provided an irresistible vehicle for the transmission of American popular culture to the Orient, all the more so because they embodied some inherently Asian elements in their storylines. However, although some of these stories were themselves Asian in origin, they represented the American West and the American spirit to audiences worldwide. *The Magnificent Seven's* origins in Akira Kurosawa's Japanese film *The Seven Samurai* (1954) were palpable when the American film appropriated the Japanese one in 1960. Shortly thereafter, Kurosawa's epic standoff drama *Yoshimbo* (1961) was appropriated by Sergio Leone as a *Fistful of Dollars*, which was released in Italy in 1964 and the United States in 1967. This may seem to suggest that the West was the sole appropriator, but it should be understood that Kurosawa himself grew up watching, and fell under the spell of, American Westerns such as those featuring William Hart.¹⁰ In other words, a genre as powerful and well-articulated as the American Western could not be limited to American soil. The first step in the diffusion of the Western to the Orient witnessed its arrival in Asia as more or less a curiosity in the 1920s and 1930s, but in the hands of Asians themselves it would ultimately become a new breed of Westerns set on Asian soil.

The recent popular Chinese film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is nominally a *wuxia* story featuring a hero who operates using a code of chivalry and fighting oppression as he protects powerless people. That alone subliminally links *Crouching Tiger* to the American Western, but the film also uses cinematic techniques such as camera movement, plot devices, and character development from the American Western movie genre to make this a Western-style fantasy film. With its desert bandits and heroic action, *Crouching Tiger* pays homage to the American Western. There is something universal about a lone hero meeting challenges in distant locales, his strict moral codes evident despite the fact that he operates in areas where laws are not (yet) established. *Crouching Tiger*, which represents the fusion of not only styles but also production, as it was a partnership between Chinese and American producers, became a surprise international success.¹¹ Interestingly, as a reminder of the genre's versatility, its director, Wang Lee, later produced the revisionist Western *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

Taking yet another cue from the American Western, Chinese filmmakers are now casting that country's own desert interior as a parallel to the American West. The most noteworthy of the recent Chinese Westerns is the stunning *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (2003). The plot is nominally Asian enough—a warrior is sent to the Gobi Desert by the emperor to apprehend a lawbreaker and along the way has many encounters with local tribes and

bandits. However, the picaresque story is developed and filmed much like an American Western. The warrior Lai Xi is an outsider (Japanese) of few words and impressive stature. Like Palladin in the edgy 1960s-era television Western *Have Gun, Will Travel*, he wears black and possesses a stoic honor and integrity in any assignment. Lai Xi's journey westward takes him to Frontier Pass, beyond which military outposts (forts) become scarce and the law virtually nonexistent. On his journey, Lai Xi experiences mystical events and encounters a tribe of troublesome Turks, the latter reminiscent of recalcitrant Indians and a reminder that all cultures have their "others." Significantly, the rebellious folk on the frontier are Muslims, and they have a modern counterpart that fights to retain its own lifestyle amid globalizing trends that have made modern China an economic superpower. China's recent confrontation with the Uighurs represents that nation's bid for complete control on what may be seen as its own western frontier, albeit in modern times. In any event, *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* resonates as an American Western in that Lai Xi makes short work of several would-be assassins at the gates of a livestock enclosure, his swift swordsmanship bringing to mind film versions of the gunfight at the OK Corral in Tombstone, Arizona.

Scenery is a contributing factor in *Warriors of Heaven and Earth*. The superb cinematography by Zhao Fei captures the stark beauty of the Gobi Desert, just as John Ford's classic *Stagecoach* (1939) helped put Monument Valley on the map. But Fei's brilliant use of color cinematography recalls the best of more recent American Westerns (for example, *The Professionals* and *Dances with Wolves*). In Fei's desert landscape, indigenous people and outsiders interact and spar in scenes of incredible natural beauty—mesas, sand dunes, bluffs, and mountain ranges—all the staples of "western" scenery that the Chinese now film with aplomb in places like the once remote Tulufan region in Xinjiang Province. In the English-dubbed version of *Warriors and Heaven and Earth*, one canyon is called "Red Rock Gorge." At the end of *Warriors of Heaven and Earth*, when Chinese warrior Li asks Lai Xi where he is from, he simply replies, "Japan." When Li asks, "Where is that?" Lai Xi replies, "To the East"—a reminder that there are many Easts.

Speaking of Japan, it too has recently experimented with the American Western, as is evident in the 2008 Japanese film *Sukiaki Western Django*. Even the title of this film suggests fusion, for *Sukiaki* refers to a Japanese dish, while *Django* derives from Sergio Carbucci's spaghetti Western of the same name. The *Western* in the title, of course, leaves no doubt as to the ultimate source of inspiration. *Sukiaki Western Django* is set in the period of Japanese history when brutal clans dominated the countryside and the samurai rose to

take control. Although a Japanese production with an almost entirely Japanese cast, *Sukiaki Western Django* takes place in a fictional locale that is simultaneously Western and Oriental—that is, American and Asian. The two rival clans have a showdown in the nominally western town of Yuta, Nevada, where mayhem breaks loose as old scores are settled. Symbolically, these clans are called the “reds” and the “whites”—a use of color that has roots in Japanese culture but also resonates in the American Western as a battle between European Americans and Indians. The main figure in *Sukiaki Western Django* is a nameless gunfighter who arrives in time to assist a prostitute in getting justice—a familiar formula in American Westerns, including Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1990), which breathed new life into the American Western and impressed filmmakers worldwide. *Sukiaki Western Django*’s only American character is Quentin Tarantino, who plays Ringo; his presence here is appropriate given Tarantino’s reputation as the purveyor of hip, cool violence in American film. Otherwise, the Japanese characters act out not only an epic period in their own country’s history but also a drama that is unmistakably western American in form and style. A particularly noteworthy scene in this film features a painted backdrop landscape complete with a yellow, disklike setting sun and a towering, black, volcanic mountain. This backdrop abstracts both Western and Eastern landscape elements to underscore the similarities between the two imagined places. Similarly, the wildly mixed architectural sets combining ancient Japanese structures and western false-front buildings are mind-boggling. *Sukiaki Western Django* is both a tribute to the American Western and a metaphor for how seamlessly it can travel back to one of its sources of inspiration, namely, the Far East during its lawless “frontier” period. Looked at in a broader context though, this film reminds one how dominant the West (both the United States and its art form, the Western) is in modern-day Japan.

To a lesser extent, other Asian countries, for example Thailand, are also producing Westerns, even though they may be set in modern times and locales far removed from the American West. In *The Protector* (2006), a Thai police chief is called upon to travel to Australia to free two very different kinds of victims—endangered animals captured by smugglers, and a beautiful Thai girl who has been “forced into modern-day slavery”—which is to say prostitution.¹² In his brashness and certitude, though, the police chief as protector is a characteristically western hero in that he embodies attitudes about good vs. evil, retribution and justice, and the like. Significantly, he operates by his own rules rather than relying on established legal conventions. The 2008 Korean film *The Good, The Bad, The Weird*, is even more explicitly western. Although

the time period is the 1940s and the locale is Manchuria, the entire film, from premise to plot, pays homage to Sergio Leone's classic spaghetti Western *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Like its predecessor, this film directed by Ji-woon Kim centers on three outlaws searching for a lost treasure, in this case what they believe to be an ancient Chinese treasure. Shot in the deserts of China, which double for the barren American West, *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* features plenty of masterful gunplay, spectacular hell-bent-for-leather horsemanship, and gritty, conflicted characters, one of whom dresses like a cowboy right out of the American Wild West. In stunning action sequences that modern moviegoers demand, the film's main characters are pursued across the sweeping deserts by the Japanese army, Korean freedom fighters, and a Manchurian crime syndicate. Although making such a patently Western-style film involved a risk—it was, after all, ground that others had traversed in both serious and comical films—*The Good, The Bad, The Weird* became an overnight sensation in Asia, riding high in the number one position at the Korean box office for several months. In 2010, it was imported to the United States, appearing in theaters before being released on DVD. The latter contains an interview with Kim, who calls his film an “Oriental Western”—a reminder of the enduring international appeal of this characteristically American genre.

The theme of the East as West also plays out in another part of the Orient in modern times, namely the Middle East, but its purveyors are American, not Middle Eastern. For example, the 2004 film *Hidalgo*, based very loosely on the real story of Frank Hopkins, an American westerner who is part Native American and an excellent horseman, brings the American West into the heart of Arabia. In this Western played out in the early twentieth-century Middle East, Frank, played by Viggo Mortensen, plans to enter his stallion, Hidalgo, in the premier horse race that traverses the Arabian Peninsula. As an American, Frank finds himself up against not only the physical obstacles posed by the Arabian environment—including sweltering heat and a ferocious sandstorm—but also cultural obstacles, including dishonest and sinister Arabs who attempt to scuttle his plans for victory. Frank, though, prevails—and why not? He is a genuine westerner who can ultimately show the Arabs a thing or two about not only good horsemanship but also heroism and fair play. In the process, he also gets the girl. The film *Hidalgo* presents some Arabs as duplicitous, which is part of Hollywood's long tradition of creating what Jack Sheehan sarcastically called “Reel Bad Arabs.”¹³

Some critics of the war in Iraq saw *Hidalgo* as the parable of a “Cowboy President” (George W. Bush) attempting to reform the Arab world through seemingly chivalrous deeds much like a hero in a Western movie. After all,

shortly after September 11, 2001, Bush stated that Osama bin Laden was “wanted dead or alive,” and even made a reference to the “old wanted posters,” as he announced the United States’ search for this mastermind of the attacks. Six years later, with al-Qaeda inflicting its particularly savage brand of warfare on civilians in portions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, a weary (and perhaps wiser) President Bush still used the analogy, only he now qualified it. “This is wild country,” Bush observed of the Middle East, but he now added the sobering and humbling confession, “This is wilder than the Wild West.”¹⁴ Actually, it has been this wild for quite some time, as Eric Margolis aptly observed before the United States went after the Taliban. As Margolis put it, the area along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border “was a combination of Dodge City and the Arabian Nights.”¹⁵ Bush sought to emulate President Ronald Reagan, who also owned a ranch, dressed like a cowboy from time to time, and did not hesitate to use military action when it seemed the right thing to do. Reagan had famously used the term “Evil Empire” to refer to the Soviet Union, which stretched across a large portion of the East. Taking a cue, perhaps, Bush later used the term “Axis of Evil” to refer to Libya, Iran, and North Korea, which likewise are troublesome spots scattered across much of the Arab world and Asia. Critics of President Bush saw him as unable to conceptualize the post-9/11 world in terms other than simple, Orientalist-inspired distinctions like Christian vs. Muslim or good vs. evil. Nevertheless, those who viewed the peoples of Afghanistan or Iraq as unable to become Western enough to support democracy also used an enduring Orientalist prejudice built on the stereotype of unchanging and unchangeable Easterners.

Disenchantment with such aggressive policies motivated reviewers of Oliver Stone’s film *Alexander* to see parallels between the monomaniacal Alexander the Great and President Bush.¹⁶ Both envisioned expanding Western civilization into an East that proved reluctant to accept it. It is very tempting—but likely too easy (and perhaps even still too early)—to claim that Bush-era policy in the Arab/Muslim world was simply a reenactment of Western/European expansion, whether by Alexander or the Crusaders. It might just as easily be regarded as a result of an American exceptionalism based in large part on the nation’s perceptions of ever-expanding frontiers (the West, outer space, the hearts and minds of mankind).¹⁷ Certainly, there are enough tempting similarities to make Orientalists of all political persuasions speculate about the global consequences of such a western/frontier American *mentalité*.

Popular film can, and has, influenced American foreign policy in Asia and may also have done so in the Middle East.¹⁸ The antiwar movie *Three Kings* (1999) is a case in point. It follows the exploits of three American soldiers who

go rogue and plunder treasure in Iraq during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Influenced by Orientalist fantasy stories such as *The Man Who Would Be King* and spaghetti Westerns such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, its would-be kings run roughshod over a desert frontier. *The Three Kings* castigates the United States for its failure to support anti-Saddam forces who were crushed by Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, as the insurgency was initially encouraged and then betrayed by the first Bush administration. This betrayal was still palpable when neocons in the Bush administration formulated Middle Eastern policy as the War on Terrorism heated up in 2001–2002. The logical conclusion? To set things right, the United States should again intervene or face eternal condemnation. Ironically, by intervening, the United States would soon face that same fate, as much of the world opposed the US invasion of Iraq.

Although 2008 marked a change in power in Washington with the election of antiwar President Barack Obama, things did not change as quickly as some predicted or hoped. In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in December of 2009, Obama stood tall at the podium and delivered a sobering message to the committee and to the world, namely, that violence can be justified when reason fails and the cause is just. While downplaying military excess and abuse, Obama nevertheless called on American exceptionalism based in part on American expansionism. He noted that it is America's responsibility to not only defeat al-Qaeda, but also to foster prosperity and democracy worldwide, a point upon which his western-inspired Republican predecessor(s) likely agreed. Obama observed that Americans protect noncombatants rather than slaughtering them as do terrorists and, one might add, as did bad guys bent on terrorizing the frontier American West in popular film.

Obama finally brought frontier justice to bin Laden in 2011. The U.S. military's code word for this top-secret operation in Pakistan—and for bin Laden himself—was "Geronimo." Although some Native Americans quickly deplored that comparison between an Apache chief and an Arab terrorist, it was certainly understandable given bin Laden's Geronimo-like ability to elude the US military for so long in an arid part of the Muslim world that had long been equated with the frontier American West. That such a comparison could be made by the normally politically savvy Obama administration serves as a reminder that American Orientalism is remarkably persistent and easily exported overseas to the real Orient.

How the Old West plays out in films about the Arab/Muslim world speaks volumes about America's (and Americans') desire to set things straight using Western-style characters and impulsive action. In the movie *Sahara* (2005), underwater archaeologist (and Texan) Clive Cussler tells a fanciful story of a

team scouring Muslim West Africa for the wreckage of a Confederate ironclad steamship, the *Texas*. This ship was reportedly lost on a clandestine voyage at the end of the American Civil War, and the intrepid archaeologists search the now bone-dry desert interior of Mali for it. These archaeologists are, in effect, modern-day versions of hardworking cowboys and good gunslingers—honest, impulsive, and brave men of action. Under the direction of swashbuckling archaeologist Matthew McConaughey, the Americans begin searching for the vessel—that is, reclaiming a piece of American history. By coincidence, they meet up with a fetching European woman, a doctor who works for the World Health Organization and is investigating an outbreak afflicting the locals in the southern Sahara. The movie features a mysterious, sinister Tuareg and a few other stereotypical characters but otherwise treats Arabs (and Africans) with respect. The real villains in *Sahara*, in fact, are US government bureaucrats who turn a blind eye to the problem. As free agents with a conscience, though, the Texan-led team comes to the rescue by not only solving a pollution problem but also finding the *Texas*, and considerable treasure, under the desert sands. Again, this plot suggests that Americans can right wrongs in the Arab world and in the process unearth those treasures that inevitably await the enterprising and ingenious people brave enough to pull it off. In popular culture, the American archaeologist is often a crusader-cowboy who encounters corruption and sets things right, usually single-handedly, and often woos (and wins) an attractive woman in the process.¹⁹ In a sense, then, *Sahara* leads us to rethink the notion of an “American Sahara,” one that now exports the American frontier into that legendary Old World desert rather than the other way around.

But the Muslim world of the Middle East and North Africa has proven especially tough to influence positively about western American values—much tougher than Asia. This may reflect a simmering resentment that the United States has helped rob the Arab world of its own history as manifested in the growing Pan-Arab/Muslim fundamentalism that would ban all “infidels,” especially Christians, from business ventures in Arabia and its environs. Bitter memories of the Crusades are often cited, but this mistrust is in effect a more recent phenomenon exacerbated by American support for Israel during and after the humiliating Arab-Israeli War of 1967. It should be remembered that Cecil B. DeMille’s film *King Richard and the Crusaders* received a warm reception in Egypt in the mid-1950s.²⁰ The point worth noting here is that films produced in the Middle East in recent times are so universally pro-Arab and often anti-American that the likelihood of a western American theme being embraced is remote. Instead, Americans must content themselves with

historically themed films such as *Hidalgo* and *Sahara*, and modern-era action films such as *Body of Lies* (2008), in which a cowboylike CIA agent risks all to stop al-Qaeda, bring peace and prosperity to the region, and woo a beautiful local Muslim woman in the process.

Visions of an American West continue to influence what Americans experience as they travel in the Middle East and Asia. In writing about Mongolia's Gun-Galuut Nature Reserve, for example, environmentalist Heidi Landecker noted that "the landscape, wild and treeless, is very like the American West; the theme music from *Bonanza* keeps playing unbidden in my head." *Bonanza*, which ran for fourteen years as a television series and lives eternally as reruns into the twenty-first century, epitomized the serialized television Western. Further drawing the comparison between West and East, Landecker observed that "Mongolia, twice the size of Texas, has [only] 2.8 million people, more than two thirds of them nomads."²¹ This topic—the westernizing (by which I mean the western Americanization) of the real East itself—remains one of the most fertile frontiers of scholarship on American Orientalism. One of the more vivid references to finding the American West in arid interior Asia is found in Nicole Mones's 1998 bestseller *Lost in Translation*, when peripatetic protagonist Alice Mannegan encounters Erem Obo, a Mongolian "desert town frozen in time" and imagines it to be "another Tonopah, Nevada." For Alice, "just the sight now of these low sand-colored buildings, this contained little grid backed right up to a tributary range of brown desert mountains and the blazing blue sky, brought back memories" of the similarly situated former mining town in Nevada that made such an impression on her during her youthful travels through the West.²²

This vision of Asia as somehow akin to the American West is worth further exploration. It persists as an element of Asia's modern development, which, although it may not mention the Western by name, certainly alludes to the western spirit of economic, colonial-inspired expansion. In describing his first trip to China, American architect Michael Sorkin first quoted Benjamin Disraeli ("The East is a Career"), then became even more candid about the opportunities there. "China" as Sorkin put it, "has become American architecture's wet dream." Sorkin went on to say that China "evoked in me a colonial fantasy that was surely of a piece with the acquisitive incursions of centuries." Realizing that China had succumbed to westernization, or rather Americanization, Sorkin concluded: "China is building U.S.-style McCities that put L.A. or Phoenix to shame."²³ In other words, not only has the East seduced Americans with the possibility of becoming rich there (a common theme of Orientalism), but we have now seduced the East itself, or at least

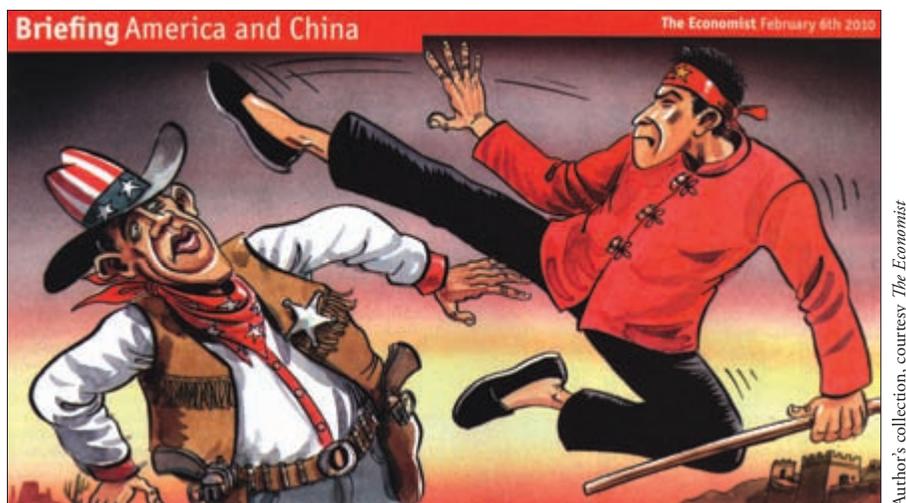


Fig. 10-4. As a metaphor for the changing balance of power between the United States and China, a February 2010 cartoon in *The Economist* shows President Obama as a cowboy sheriff about to meet the wrath of a kickboxing Chinese warrior.

parts of the East, into becoming more like America. Sorkin's mentioning Phoenix and Los Angeles is on target, for these are quintessential western cities whose identities embody considerable Orientalization. Then, too, Sorkin's use of the term "wet dream" is especially apt here, as such dreams are likely to be associated with *adolescence or youth* and involve *subconscious fantasizing* (most often by young men) about *sexual or sensual pleasure*—three ingredients associated with Orientalism itself. That the Chinese government may not always see eye to eye with such enthusiastic American ambition was made abundantly clear in the February 6–12, 2010, issue of *The Economist*, which featured a cartoon depicting President Obama dressed as a cowboy sheriff about to be assaulted by a traditionally clad Chinese martial artist (fig. 10-4). In this symbol-rich cartoon, Obama wears a Stetson hat decorated with an American flag, while the Chinese warrior wears a red headband bearing the Chinese Communist government's signature star. Mesas and saguaro cacti form the backdrop for Obama, and the Great Wall lies behind the Chinese warrior—icons of West and East, respectively. Tellingly, Obama is leaning backward, away from the warrior, who is flying toward the president in an aggressive kickboxing move that is likely to upset the balance of power. As *The Economist* article makes clear, the traditional relationship between China and the United States has now changed, and Americans are no longer able to call all the shots, so to speak.

In his commentaries about the United States and China, Sorkin astutely notes how closely landscape symbolizes culture. Throughout this book I have referred to features in the landscape, such as topography and vegetation, which become symbols that facilitate comparisons between America and the Orient. As noted earlier, plants such as sagebrush, date palms, and alfalfa readily serve as metaphors for people(s) because they are easily anthropomorphized. Like people, they prefer certain habitats, have identifiable visual characteristics, and suggest places of origin. If one plant in particular has become a symbol for the restlessness of the western American frontier, it is tumbleweed (*Salsola kali*). At first glance, what could be more western American than this plant, which becomes a dust-colored, ball-shaped bush that blows along in the wind as its seeds begin to ripen? However, its less familiar name—Russian thistle—reveals its real source of origin. Native to the steppes of southwestern Asia, the tumbleweed is one of the characteristic invaders that accidentally found its way here in the nineteenth century. Significantly, this foreigner adjusted so well that it appears native. In other words, the tumbleweed is really as western American as Genghis Khan.

The tenacious, ever-mobile tumbleweed took center stage in a recent opinion article expressing disenchantment with Bush-era US foreign policy. Its author, a university student originally from the desert lands of eastern Oregon, urged Americans to “rethink” their popular affection for this “weed of the West.” Upon returning home from a trip abroad, she now found the tumbleweed to be an “indescribably ugly” plant that could serve as a “double-sided” metaphor for American expansion and insensitivity worldwide. As she critically observed, “I often wonder if we [Americans] move as freely through the world as the tumbleweed does across an open landscape, spreading the seeds of our culture and government in our path.” Because the United States is often considered to spread its own values “with little regard for the culture, the people, or the way of life that was there before us,” she then asked: “Is it going too far to say that much of the world, in this present era, thinks of us as a noxious weed?”²⁴

That, of course, is a far different sentiment than that expressed in the romantic ballad “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” from the 1936 Gene Autry movie of the same name. In that movie and song, the tumbleweed symbolized something noble, a wanderer who moves through the land in search of something. The tumbleweed personified the American cowboy, who has an overall attachment to the concept of the land, but never any one particular place. That sentiment used to be laudable but is now increasingly suspect in an age that questions mobility in favor of localism and sees globalization as unsustainable.

Still, though, American Orientalism is not a one-way street in that it can play a valuable role in cultural exchange and cooperation. Again, the landscape offers symbols upon which to build. In 2010, for example, the National Park Service launched a new initiative—*The Mount Rainier-Mount Fuji Sister Mountain Curriculum*. This project, which “builds on the long history of connections between Mount Rainier and Mount Fuji,” not only created a curriculum but also involved a partnership between American and Japanese teachers and their students. As the Park Service website put it, this project uses “Mount Fuji and Mount Rainier as a lens to learn about the history, culture, geography and environmental uses of each others’ countries.”²⁵ That creative use of surrogate landscapes for yet another purpose, namely cultural understanding, is a reminder of western American Orientalism’s versatility. It also leads one to conclude that a phenomenon this versatile, deep seated, and potent is likely to play a role in future relationships between the United States and the real Orient.