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Intercultural Dialogues: Cultures of the East – Introduction

The starting point in intercultural studies is always the culture of the Other, or as Appiah puts it in “Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers”, the culture of the Stranger, as well as the desire for cosmopolitanism, which prompts a critical reexamination of existing and implicit assumptions or schemas through which we shape our cultural identities, values, and knowledge. In this sense, intercultural studies are always development of communicative skills in complex conceptual translation, producing the expansion of the field of human discourse (Geertz) within the research interstice that Levi-Strauss calls the liminal anthropological field, marked by the departure from one culture and the approach to another.

The special issue “Intercultural Dialogues” brings together several authors who analyze and interpret Eastern cultures from different angles. Therefore, the papers presented here are not merely descriptions of selected aspects of Eastern cultures, but rather contain multicultural inter-spaces and links, providing complex understanding of some of their basic concepts or symbols that we are otherwise accustomed to.

The paper “Emergence of the discourse on the imitability of the Qur’an” explores the rise of interpretative communities dedicated to analyzing and assessing the Qur’an. It discusses the development of a counter-discourse termed as “the imitability of the Qur’an,” which examines linguistic and stylistic imitation, as well as critical perspectives questioning the origins and authenticity of the Qur’an. In contemporary discourse, there has been a shift towards a more nuanced understanding of the Qur’an, aiming to reconcile theological and critical approaches by integrating beliefs with scholarly analysis. These discussions are often found in academic literature, particularly following the rise of postcolonial theory in the 1980s, when the oversimplification of Orientalist perspectives came under increasing criticism.

In the paper “Zhuangzi: Oblivion and Happiness”, another classical text is examined. The paper explores the concept of “zuo wang” (oblivion and happiness) as presented in the Zhuangzi text and its implications for achieving happiness and enlightenment. It discusses the various interpretations of “zuo wang” from historical and critical perspective, and its relationship to philosophical concepts such as the body, self, dao, and wisdom. It suggests that while “zuo wang” is often associated with the contemporary concept of meditation (coming from the exoticized East), Zhuangzi’s text does not explicitly endorse it. Instead, it argues that later interpretations of “zuo wang” may have diverged from Zhuangzi’s complex original teachings, reflecting the influence of different cultural contexts.

The paper “Solar Deity in Japanese Mythology” aims to challenge the notion of matriarchy in ancient Japan. This idea gained popularity in anthropology during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, largely through the works of scholars like Johann Jakob Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan. Bachofen proposed the concept of an original matriarchal society characterized by female dominance and the worship of the mother goddess, while Morgan suggested a similar evolutionary stage where women held central roles in kinship and social organization. Despite contemporary anthropology largely abandoning the concept of matriarchy, Japan is often interpreted as having had a matriarchal society due to the presence of the prominent female deity Amaterasu in Shinto religion. However, the author offers an alternative explanation, refuting this simplistic assumption. Through a critical analysis of cultural and historical contexts, the paper explores the intricate evolution of the Amaterasu myth and its symbolic significance within Japanese society. By examining the incorporation of mythical elements and the representation of the solar deity, the author explains the power structures and gender dynamics in early Japanese civilization.

The following paper explores the cultural analysis of specific linguistic expressions in Persian (Farsi), investigating the role of culture in shaping language concepts. The paper titled “Language, Conceptualization, and Cultural Linguistics: The Role of Culture in the Formation of Cognitive Schemas in Languages” conducts a case study on the Persian language. It aims to delve into cultural conceptualizations surrounding “politeness” and the Iranian compliment etiquette of *ta’arof* through the review and analysis of diverse examples.

In the remaining two papers, the authors delve into the reception of Eastern cultures in European painting and art during the late 19th century.

“The Interculturality on Canvas – Collages of Religion and Culture in the Works of Gustave Moreau” („Интеркултуралност на платну – колажи религија и култура у делима Гистава Мореа“) demonstrates how French culture of the late 19th century and the art of symbolism adopted and portrayed themes and motifs borrowed from Eastern cultures and religions. Such “borrowings” are considered one of the fundamental characteristics of Moreau’s work, often cited as a prime example of inter-culturality during that period.

“The Impact of Japonisme on European Art and Painting in the Late 19th Century: Characteristics of Cultural Exchange During the Rise of European Imperialism” aims to map out the pathways and networks through which Japonisme spread in Europe, revealing how elements of Japanese culture were adopted, assimilated, and to what extent they contributed to the invention of new styles and aesthetic standards (particularly impressionism and postimpressionism). It examines how European culture’s dominant position enabled it to appropriate elements from other cultures and how Japan was exoticized and orientalized in European perceptions including Japan’s own reception of this exoticization.

Collecting in one issue the papers related to various aspects of Islam, Japanese, Chinese and Iranian culture, as well as to some historical aspects of the reception of these cultures in Europe, was a complex task of integrating into a whole not only diverse critical approaches, but also the vast and heterogeneous geographical and cultural field encompassed therein. The editors have carefully selected papers that focus on concrete research problems, enabling a deeper understanding of certain topics, thus avoiding an orientalist approach, which would treat too extensively the very different cultural contents constituting the East and the Orient.

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