

# Eurocentrism and Orientophobia: Have We Stopped Fearing 'Asiaticism'?

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The study was supported by a grant from the Russian Scientific Foundation (#24-78-10104),  
<https://rscf.ru/project/24-78-10104/>

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-1-168-178

The confrontation with the West has precipitated strategic changes in key aspects of Russia's foreign, economic, and defense policies. The last few years have seen the country turn towards an Eastern (i.e., Asian) course and towards cooperation with the World Majority and Global South. However, not everything is so simple when it comes to culture and ideological goal-setting. Culturally and civilizationally, Russia remains a Eurocentric country, oriented towards Western cultural patterns—albeit those found not in present-day Europe, rejected and condemned in official media and political rhetoric, but in Europe's Christian past.

The idea of Russia as 'different Europe' was first clearly stated in the 19th century by Slavophiles and the Westernizer Chaadayev, and subsequently developed by figures like Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. And it remains the most important element of Russian ideological discourse. This latent self-determination 'through Europe' contradicts Russia's official identity as a civilization-state. After all, if Russia is a civilization-state, it should not look up to anyone in order to find its own identity.

A civilization-state is autonomous culturally and ideologically. Indeed, civilizational independence presupposes a unique vision of history and of what a person should be or become. The classic Russian geopolitical theorist Vadim Tsymbursky defined civilization as "a special humanity on a special land" united by a "sacred vertical" understood as "religion or ideology that correlates the culture, social practice and geopolitics of a group of peoples with a transcendental higher reality" (cited by Kholmogorov, 2016, p. 43). Does Russia have answers to these 'ultimate' questions? Answers that are common for the whole of modern Russia as a state and society, and not for individual culturally-united communities within it—be they Orthodox or Muslim.

The search for these answers undoubtedly necessitates separate research, but its results may not suit the advocates of Russia as a 'civilization-state.' Yuri Slezkine (2023, p. 54) points out: "There is no mass of autonomous civilizational development underneath Russia, like there is in China, India, or Persia, nor does Russia have the harmony, integrity, and purposefulness of Islam. Above Russia is not a blue sky, like in the Middle Kingdom, but a common civilizational umbrella shared with Europe. It is easier for Russia to say that it protects Europe from itself, than to say that it is no longer Europe."

Another important feature of a civilization, noted by French historian Fernand Braudel, is its ability to resolutely reject and fence itself off from cultural ideas and traditions that have a different civilizational origin. Per Braudel, a civilization's strength and power are determined by its resistance to external cultural interventions.

A mere glance at Russia's history reveals its inability to meet this criterion. From the 16th century to the present, the country has

repeatedly changed its form of government, ideology, and basic values. An Orthodox kingdom with an isolationist yet eschatological mission, then a modern European empire with great power aspirations, then the radically secular USSR, then the equally-radical neoliberal swing in the early 1990s, and finally modern Russia, which is trying to assemble its “new old” identity from the diverse vestiges of the past.

None of this is bad, as is often claimed by hostile commentators who demand some sort of morally-tinged ‘constancy’ from Russian history. History is variable, and reality is a combination of contradictions. But this does fit poorly into unambiguous ideological constructs like a civilization-state, which so far resembles an intellectual puzzle more than obvious reality.

Russia’s civilizational identity is difficult to define for several reasons, including its culture’s dominant Eurocentrism (variously expressed as opposition to Europe or identification with it) and seeming susceptibility to external cultural influences (which have often provoked radical transformations of Russian society and the state). This susceptibility has been the focus of Russian philosophers and writers from Chaadayev (who saw it as wholly bad) to Dostoevsky (who attributed to the Russian people the unique trait of “universal empathy,” the ability to understand and embrace the diversity of the world and its cultural forms). While Dostoevsky’s claim sounds inspiring, it aligns poorly with ‘civilization’ as a closed cultural space with minimal external influence.

However, all these problems of civilizational choice pale before a far more serious, but far less discussed, phenomenon. Our confused ideas of our own civilizational autonomy are complicated by the dread of the East that is deeply rooted in Russia’s Europeanized culture; Orientophobia, Sinophobia, a constantly restated fear of ‘Asiaticism’ and of advancing ‘Pan-Mongolism’ (Vladimir Solovyov).

## **THE ‘YELLOW PERIL’ AND SINOPHOBIA**

The second half of the 19th century in the West, including Russia, saw the rise of modern society. The formation of developed economies and modern urban populations, and the growing cultural and political significance of media and literature, led to the emergence and spread

of new ideas and political movements. Most prominently, nationalism, whether as anti-imperial 'peripheral nationalism' (e.g., in the Balkans, the 'powder keg of Europe'), or as the gradual transformation of complex pre-modern imperial entities into Europe's relatively homogeneous 'imperial nations.'

Nationalism often took on extreme forms: rapidly-spreading, widely-respected, 'scientific' racism contributed to the rapid growth of the West's military and economic power and to its colonial subjugation of non-Western nations.

The emergence of the global economy, in turn, spurred labor migration from Asia and, in particular, China. Like today, this incited anti-immigrant sentiments, which in a racist cultural environment fanned nationalist prejudices. Britain's Opium Wars with China were characteristically distorted by the European press, which pitted 'savage' Chinese against the 'civilizing' British. The infamous Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) was presented as a brutal massacre started by a dangerous Chinese sect. Karl Marx described the Chinese Taiping as subhumans, for whom "a human head means no more than a head of cabbage" (cited by Gadzhiev, 2020, p. 2098). Rudyard Kipling said that, unlike other races, the Chinese can only "swarm," not work. "As early as the beginning of the 20th century, the Yellow Peril became one of the two great xenophobias, along with the Jewish conspiracy theory" (Gritsai and Shvets, 2021, p. 124).

Europe's intellectual elites also responded to the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment. Sociopolitical polemics cited the Yellow Peril, and it gradually slipped into great powers' statecraft. For example, Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote to Russian Tsar Nicholas II that "the great task of the future for Russia [is] to cultivate the Asian Continent and to defend Europe from the inroads of the Great Yellow race" (cited by Gadzhiev, 2020).

Russia as a barrier country—the eastern frontier of Europe, called upon to hold back the hordes of Asian barbarians and protect the greatness of European civilization—appealed to many Russian writers and intellectuals. Hence the Yellow Peril took on a new meaning in Russia, and opposition to 'global China' was seen as nothing less than the civilizational mission of the Russian state.

The Chinese penetration into the Russian Far East was described as a “creeping expansion,” which sooner or later would be followed by a military invasion. Fyodor Dostoevsky says in the *Writer’s Diary*: “The Southern Line of the Siberian Railway, the future of China. Just a certain broadening of outlook and thought, or a push from reforms, would be enough... [for the Chinese] to realize that there are empty and rich lands all around... [A]nd there are too many Chinese for them to not... think about seizing these lands... to not recognize how weak and unprotected these lands are and will inevitably remain in the future” (cited by Ponkratova and Tarakanova, 2021, p. 53).

However, it was not only military conquest that sparked fear. Philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, one of the best-known heralds of the Yellow Peril, speaks through his characters, in the apocalyptic *Three Conversations*, about Europe’s possible imminent conquest by Asian peoples. And in his essay *Enemies from the East?*, he considers the “Asian threat” an immediate danger: “There is reason to believe that Far Asia, which has so many times sent its devastating nomad hordes against the Christian world, is preparing a final strike from a completely new direction: it will overcome us with its cultural and spiritual forces, concentrated in the Chinese state and Buddhist religion” (Solovyov, 1988, p. 488).

Dmitry Merezhkovsky sets forth a slightly different view in *The Approaching Boor*. He sees China as the center of positivism and spiritual philistinism, since the “yellow civilization” did not and does not know the transcendent. Merezhkovsky warns that modern Europe is becoming “Chinese” as it loses the Christian impulse that made it a unique civilization. Therefore, “Sinification” is more an internal than external threat; the threat of modern secularism and its simplification of culture. “Here is the main ‘yellow peril:’ not outside, but within; not in China coming to Europe, but in Europe going to China. Our faces are still white, but under the white skin there is no longer the same thick, scarlet, Aryan blood, but a more liquid, ‘yellow’ blood, like Mongolian ichor; our eyes are still straight, but beginning to squint and narrow.” Merezhkovsky here does not distinguish Russia from Europe.

Russian literature of the late 1800s—which we take pride in for upholding universal human interests and humanism, and whose ‘abandonment’ by the West we fiercely rebuke—is largely a product of Europe’s 19th century ‘nationalist’ culture. This neither detracts from the literature’s merits, nor calls for its ideological deconstruction as demanded by Western liberals. But the pan-European idea of the Yellow Peril has its (little-recognized) place in this literature. For instance, Vissarion Belinsky wrote that: “Hypocrisy, deceit, lies, pretense, and humiliation are the nature of the Chinese people. And how could it be otherwise, where ceremony consumes the entire spiritual life of the people... Kneeling and bowing is their sacred duty...” (cited by Ponkratova and Tarakanova, 2021, p. 50).

### **POST-SOVIET LIBERALISM: POLITICAL EXPLOITATION OF THE ‘CHINA THREAT’**

Eurocentrism and Sinophobia remain two sides of the same coin even now. Human rights, the equality of nations, the Russian government’s supposed invention of external enemies to justify its ineffective autocracy, and similar arguments of Russian liberals all evaporate as soon as strategic partnership is proposed with someone whose interests differ from the West’s.

Until just recently, liberals used the image of China as a dangerous state—with a growing economy, huge population, and ‘territorial claims against Russia’—as their main and final argument for a decisive and unconditional military and economic rapprochement with the West. For instance: “I see no option besides a clear recognition that our *enemies are not in the West* and that, beyond our western border, lies precisely the civilization that we need to join. ... Otherwise, we will find ourselves in the position of a demographically-declining country that *does not belong to any major civilization*; a country that is weakening economically and that cannot compete militarily with the U.S. or with rapidly-strengthening China, but which has immense territory and resources. There is no need to say what usually happens in such a situation” (Urnov, 2005).

Boris Nemtsov also raised the specter of the Chinese threat. During the Crimean Spring in 2014, in his article *Russia Is Turning Into China’s*

*Colony* he warned: “Given that there are ten Chinese for every Russian, and that China’s GDP is five times greater than Russia’s, one can guess how the situation will develop further. Propagandists scream that Putin’s main merit is protection of the country’s sovereignty. This is a blatant lie: Russia is rapidly becoming a colony of China. Russia is losing its sovereignty” (Novoye Vremya, 2014).

In the 1990s and 2000s, Orientophobia was indeed one of the most common political techniques. A supposedly inevitable confrontation with China was always cited to justify the wildest military, political, or economic initiatives: from joining NATO, to privatizing Russia’s strategic resources under Western companies that would then protect Russian territory from the “Chinese hordes.” (Ironically, Vladimir Zelensky is guided by the same logic today, offering Western companies control over Ukraine’s strategic resources in the hope that this will force Western capital to protect the remains of Ukraine’s sovereign territory. This logic also underlies the Ukraine policy of Donald Trump, who does not shy away from openly colonial rhetoric.)

In the 2000s, the Russian government’s initiatives to resolve territorial disputes with China (culminating in the border demarcation of 2005) encountered fierce resistance. Nationalist forces, and the then-influential liberal establishment, opposed the deal, claiming that Russia was “surrendering territory” and “turning into a vassal of China.” They essentially resuscitated the rhetoric and propaganda slogans of the Cold War, when the ‘China threat’ actually was somewhat realistic.

Why did the ‘China threat’ arguments work for so long even though they were obviously biased and false? As discussed above, Russian culture’s Eurocentrism cannot be free of phobias—like Sinophobia—that are part of European culture itself. The ‘China threat’ fell on ground that had been prepared for centuries, especially by Russia’s post-Soviet development and ideological swerve towards ‘Western liberalism.’

Russia’s lack of strategic goal-setting, and of unbiased professional expertise on China and the entire East, cost it dearly. While the need for a “turn to the East” was proclaimed about 15 years ago, it long lacked proper political and economic support. Now, Russia is forcibly and fitfully overcoming the Eurocentrism of its 1990s-2000s foreign

policy, in the context of what is essentially a direct military clash with the West. If the Russian elite's strategic thinking in those years had been less biased, more professional and based on expertise, then many issues of political, economic, and military interaction with Asia could have been settled in a calm and balanced manner, rather than under colossal external pressure as is now the case. Indeed, if Russian policy had been more balanced, featuring development in both directions, then it might have avoided the westward distortion that culminated in 2022's acute military-political crisis.

### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE? CONCLUSIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Perception of a cultural and civilizational gap between Russia and China remains an important impediment to their establishment of firm relations. The countries speak of a military, political, and economic partnership that "knows no borders," and claim the highest levels of mutual trust, in which all past (mainly Cold-War-era) political problems are irrelevant. But in popular consciousness, China remains an 'exotic' country with a huge population that is culturally 'alien' and therefore dangerous.

Russo-Chinese rapprochement is seen as purely 'geopolitical,' driven primarily by confrontation with the West, and not as a friendship between peoples with similar values. After all, the fact that China also advocates a 'multipolar' world does not mean that the average Russian sees more in common with the Chinese than with the Europeans. And Russia's classical tradition of literature and the humanities is, indeed, of almost no help.

Russia should enhance its cultural ties with Asian countries (primarily China) and systematically implement cultural and educational policies to gradually 'displace' Eurocentrism. Many processes will occur naturally due to the circumstances. But that is not enough. Important changes must be made in schools. The historical and literary traditions—two of the most important humanities, which form modern societies' national canons of memory and identity—must be reconsidered.

Of course, these changes should not mean the 'abandonment' or 'rewriting' of existing canons. The European stage of Russian cultural



self-identification cannot and should not be discarded for current ideological convenience, but we should gently state that it has finished, by reflecting on its results. School curricula in literature, social studies, and history should become more culturological to provide for an in-depth study of the historical and geopolitical contexts of great works and their authors—whose delusions may be as great as their achievements. One can learn from both. The principle of ahistoricity still largely dominates our school programs: the social and cultural context of an era is barely analyzed, the humanities lack interdisciplinarity, and rote memorization prevails over the development of fundamental skills.

Literature, history, and social studies should include Asian and Arabic literary works and texts, written not only by European philosophers and political thinkers, but also by non-Western authors. A comparative approach is important: European and Asian literary works and other cultural artifacts should be compared, and past events in world and national history should be studied in parallel. Much has been done in recent years, but this work must be continued.

We should think about introducing a basic interdisciplinary and meta-subject exam on history, literature, and social studies, similar to the Unified State Exam. After all, the Unified State Exam is no longer a primitive test, as claimed by critics based on its status a decade ago, and its format offers broad possibilities. At present, its mandatory subjects are math, Russian, and a foreign language (until recently, this meant English or another European language, but Chinese is now available, and Arabic is coming next). But languages are tools that do not work without cultural and historical training.

Joint sports and cultural events, forums, and conferences should be organized. It is vital to develop exchange programs and academic mobility with China and other Eastern countries. China- and Asia-focused media and analysis should be 'revised' and grants should be expanded for thorough and unbiased research into Russo-Chinese history and the countries' present political, economic, and military cooperation.

Geopolitical wars can be won, but their duration, and the fruits of victory, always depend on culture and the level of national self-consciousness. Strategic turns in foreign policy and civilizational self-



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determination must be accompanied by cultural work. Modern states are not only powerful administrative and military structures, but also institutionally cohesive cultural communities—‘nations.’ Nations are created through literary canons and general historical assessments. If today we set ambitious goals of civilizational self-determination (and a ‘civilization-state’ is more a task for the future than it is a present reality), military and economic tools alone will not be enough.

Eurocentrism and Orientophobia, as two sides of the same coin, demonstrate Russia’s lack of independent civilizational foundations. While ongoing global processes are now pushing for civilizational self-determination, this does not mean subordinating ideological rhetoric to the current geopolitical agenda, but rather entails changing how we culturally identify ourselves and others. This is a difficult but urgent task.

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