

## Lotus Notes<sup>1</sup>

Nida Ghouse

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Tashkent 1958. I try and imagine it for a moment. The first conference of the Afro-Asian Writers is in session. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the poet representing Pakistan, is there. I find archival images on the internet: W. E. B. Du Bois lecturing into a bunch of microphones, meeting with the Nigerian delegation, chatting with the Chinese, raising his arms in affirmation with others. Non-alignment is in the air. In a unanimous motion a Permanent Bureau is declared. They must have thought the future as theirs. Headsets in hand, or pressed to the ear, translation devices hanging around their necks. Afro-Asian Writers. Tashkent 1958.

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I am in Cairo. History is impossible. The year is 2012.

A friend and I are walking in midsummer heat against midday traffic along Qasr al-Aini—the road on which I came to live in early 2007. We’ve both been away a while and don’t quite know what to make of the man climbing, somewhat impishly, over to the graffitied side of the army wall on the corner of Sheikh Rehan Street. We’re looking for Dar al-Odaba. Number 104. If we were to be approaching the other way, with the cars, from Mounira or Garden City, coming toward Tahrir, we’d find it on our left, right after Barclays, or so I’ve been told. That is to say I used to pass the place, oblivious of it, back and forth, on my route, almost every other day.

In 1962, the second conference of the Afro-Asian Writers Association was held in Cairo, and a decision to transfer the headquarters from Colombo to here was made. Dar al-Odaba, or Writers House, was designated in all its palatial glory as the address of the Permanent Bureau, and the Egyptian writer Youssef El Sebai was elected, for his pinkish popularity, as its general-secretary.

The reasons for the relocation, I’ve come to learn, were not insignificant. They hint at a checkered history that played out in the name of Afro-Asian militant solidarity on a map of the Non-Aligned Movement against the backdrop of the Cold War. They tell a tale of ideological affinities and strategic aversions indicative of the political aspirations endowed on literary production in the wake of anti-imperialist struggles for national liberation. They chart an unusual geography of how, for instance, Somalis in the 1960s could have come to “Sing the Praise of Chairman Mao,” in their own language no less, and then also songs in Chinese, such as “The East is Red.”

The motivation behind the move was an aggressive one. In 1962, India was at war with China, and allied with Egypt. The Sino-Soviet communists had started to split. The conference in Cairo effectively removed the organization from under China’s influence by ousting its pro-Chinese Ceylonese secretary-general, R.D. Senanayake, and repositioning the

<sup>1</sup> “Lotus Notes” began in 2014 as a monthly series commissioned and edited by Jenifer Evans for the online platform Mada Masr. It is part of a writing project by Nida Ghouse called Inner States.

Peking-controlled Colombo-based headquarters into more Soviet-compliant territory.

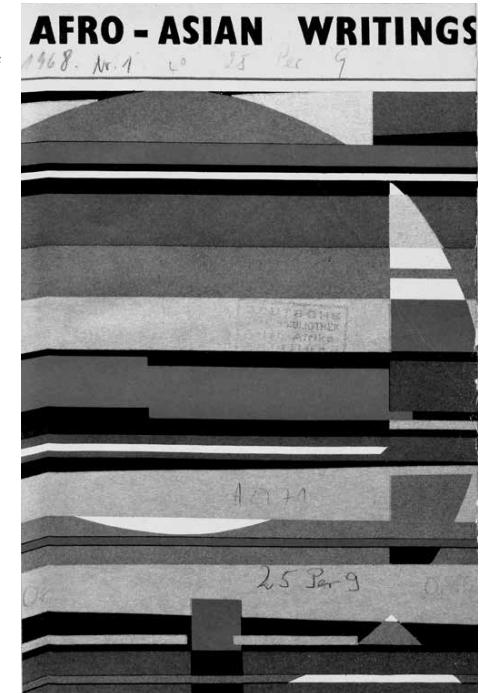
In 1966, a so-called Emergency Meeting of Afro-Asian Writers was summoned in Peking. It was arranged under the auspices of the Chinese Committee of Afro-Asian Solidarity, which, as the host organization, probably paid all the expenses. Having proclaimed the resolution to shift the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau from Colombo to Cairo as illicit, the conveners pronounced the Soviet revisionists as the “chief culprits,” who they thought ought to consider themselves excluded from the rank of Afro-Asian Writers affiliates. That four years later the Chinese, led by Kuo Mo-jo, still felt compelled to retaliate suggests that they were more than just upset. All the Afro-Asian Writers Association did back then was meet and take minutes, and so to think that the entity was seen as something to vie for is curious.

The gathering in Peking, attended only by China’s geographical neighbors and the odd émigré, blatantly used its home court advantage to arouse anti-Soviet sentiment and claim leadership over Third World cultural consciousness. Speeches were made to disavow Soviet modern revisionist literature for serving American imperialism by virtue of being too bourgeois. But the language of all thirty-eight resolutions considered, the event was effectively a failure. The Vietnamese contingent refused to condemn modern revisionism and overtly sided with the USSR absentees. It was a gesture of historical significance that tread a measure between what would and did not happen.

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We ask a man who happens to be at the gate if this is the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau, and whether it was from here that a periodical called *Lotus* had once been published. There is a big board right above us for Dar al-Obada, it’s printed in white on blue, in an angular/kufic font of Arabic. On the side of the building that faces the road, there is also a relief of block letters that says “WRITERS HOUSE” in English. But this seems to have exceeded itself as a sign: though the structure is still intact, the color is nondescript, and one has to really look to notice it.

We’ve brought along with us this old book my friend grew up with, a compilation of short stories translated from various languages into Arabic. We turn to the colophon and point to what is the same address, as if to legitimize our quest. We do this even though the man has already offered us a yes. Our demeanor toward him is casual and courteous, but I



*Afro-Asian Writings*, no. 1, Cairo, March 1968.

notice we are hesitant as well. We have no sense of what goes on in here these days, nor can we be certain what attitude awaits. Are we welcome? He ushers us in, tells us to go down the corridor, across the hall, and up the stairs. And what does it even mean for this to be the right place? We're in search of a magazine that is defunct and an editor who is dead.

When we step inside the building, we leave the sun behind. Our eyes adjust to the difference in light, which, as we cover the length of the corridor, starts to feel more like a passage in time.

The conference hall is lined with chairs that have cushioned seats and metallic frames. They are all neatly arranged, save a stray few, which makes it seem as though people were just there—for a lecture from decades ago—before they got up and left. The room is dim as the shutters are barred, and it feels as though the world outside has not been let in. The ghosts are here; the conversations once had, trapped in an attempt to keep their vision of what they wanted intact.

We're now in the stairwell, dilapidated and grand, a billiards table, its cover covered with dust, stored under the slant. We're both looking up silently as we take our first steps; we spiral slowly and turn on ourselves. There are rays coming in through blue-green panes of broken glass that hit on particles of dust and make them burst into sparks.

The main room upstairs is flooded with light, and the reality of the streets outside enters inadvertently, making itself felt. On the wall across the doorway are two portraits and a nail: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat—a suit, a uniform—and a conspicuously missing frame. At first I don't notice, but I am pointed to it, with the raising of an eyebrow and a tilt of the head.

There are two adjoining offices that seem to be the only ones occupied at the far left end. We walk over, peer in, and announce ourselves.

A few minutes later, I've been offered a chair. I sit down and to my right I notice a glass cabinet, in which all I can see is piles and piles of *Lotus*. My friend takes on the talking, introduces what I do, where I'm from, why I've come, while I can't seem to get my eyes off them. Most of the magazines are lying flat, stacked one on top of the other at the back. But the front row is on display, covers with images of art facing out. All these volumes, all these years, this is what I have come looking for.

I turn my attention to the conversation that is taking place between the three men and across the two generations present in the room. I find myself assembling some of the Arabic. We are being told that we are sitting at the desk that was the desk of Youssef El Sebai. This was his office, and the one out front his assistant's ... or maybe the

other way round. Either they're not sure, or now I'm not sure. The confusion is contagious, it passes on from what is said to the language in my head, becomes mine. In any case, this was definitely his desk. We are sitting at the desk that was the desk of Youssef El Sebai. In a tone that has been weighed down and washed over by the time that has gone longing for everything he (was thought to have) stood for, this is said again.



*Lotus, Afro-Asian Writings, no. 1, Cairo, January 1971.*

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By the end of 1978, the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau in Dar al-Odaba was disbanded. When President Anwar Sadat eventually defected to the U.S. and signed the Camp David Accords, the Arabs insisted that *Lotus* could no longer be the charge of Egypt. Besides, earlier that year, Youssef El Sebai, its editor-in-chief, had been assassinated in Cyprus. He had travelled to Nicosia to preside at a conference of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), but had been targeted on account of having accompanied Sadat, as his friend and confidant, on his infamous visit to Israel. At the time, Sebai was not just the minister of culture, but also the chairman of the state's flagship daily *Al-Ahram* and the head of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate. He had been warned that his name had appeared at the top of some underground hit list. But he had proceeded with his plans nonchalantly, refusing to be fazed by this.

On the morning of February 18, the AAPSO meeting was called into session on the fifth floor of the Hilton. But then at around 11 am, Sebai was seen, off on his own, loitering in the lobby. Had he been waiting for someone? For someone who was in fact never going to come? As one account goes, he stepped out of the hotel and walked over to a nearby newsstand. Two cars drove up, three bullets went off, papers that had scattered in the air, lay strewn on the ground. Sebai was shot in the head in cold blood and broad daylight, by a pair of Palestinian gunmen belonging to what was reported to be "a tiny renegade movement."

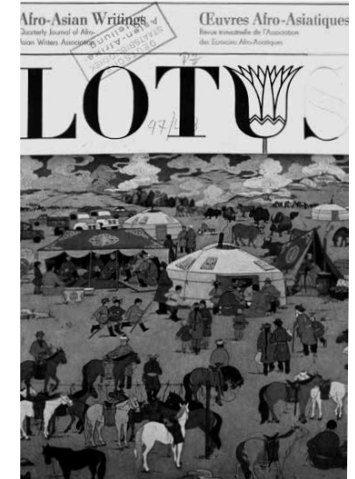
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The second time I met Michael C. Vazquez was the first time I heard that *Lotus*, the Journal of Afro-Asian Writings, had been published out of Cairo.

It was the summer of 2011. We were at a café called Downtown 34, sitting beside a wall of windows that looked out onto the fortified synagogue on Adly Street. To put it plainly, our talk was like a time warp. What I recall is being hurled into a universe in which the island of Cyprus, that said haven for hijackers, had transformed itself into a portal for an unpredicted past.

Mike remembers more. "We came to the same place with different magazines in our heads that were the same magazine," is how he puts it. What he means to say is that while he had known *Lotus* as a Cairo-based publication, I had thought it to be of Beirut. There was a reason why this was not trivial. His coherence complements my cause, which is that of dizziness.

Mike was chronologically correct. The periodical did start off in Cairo, and was edited here for a good ten years. Initially titled *Afro-Asian Writings*, its inaugural edition ostensibly appeared in March 1968, in Arabic and English, followed by the French version. By its sixth issue, which came out in October 1970, the trilingual quarterly had acquired the name *Lotus*. The Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA), and its over-arching



*Lotus, Afro-Asian Writings, no. 47/48, Beirut, January-February, 1981.*

affiliate, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), both had headquarters that hailed from this interface of Africa and Asia, the capital of Egypt. During those heydays, these institutions had been granted mansions that still operate to date, through some sort of leftover mandate, in their names. As it turns out, the prudence of Mike's account stood firmly on the floor.

Then one day *Lotus* moved. It went from Cairo to Beirut.

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In the wake of Youssef El Sebai's death, the streets of Cairo swelled up in protest.

On February 19, 1978, as his body arrived from Cyprus to be wrapped in a flag and readied for a state-sponsored service, the newspapers had spread a rumor—that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was responsible—and this in turn had spurred hate. The crowds were in a frenzy as the procession took place, and ceremonious sorrow—with its customary incantation, "There is no god but God!"—gave way to more passionate and perverse political refrains: "No more Palestine, no more Palestine! Arafat, round up your dogs!"

Prime Minister Mostafa Riyad stood up and declared: "No more Palestine after today!"

The bullet that had killed the minister of culture was seen as having hit all of Egypt. Aggrieved as he was, Anwar Sadat did not attend his dear friend's funeral, and sent Vice-President Hosni Mubarak to show face instead. Sadat was six months from secretly signing Camp David, and he had already gone across to talk peace at the Knesset, which was, after all, why Sebai had been targeted in the first place.

In the week that followed: a man was thrown off the metro by a mob gone mad; children at school were harassed and attacked; the police carried out a spate of unwarranted interrogations and arbitrary arrests; a shopkeeper turned up to work one morning to find that his storefront window had been smashed. Many have marked this as the moment when public opinion in Egypt swerved. For whatever Pan-Arabism may or may not have meant, citizens were now incited to feel that—four wars later—they had sacrificed too much of their bread in standing up against Israel, and the media took it upon itself to fuel the brazen anti-Palestinian sentiment that surged forth.

On February 28, the official daily *Al-Ahram* announced that the government would reassess the privileges granted to Palestinians as nationals in Egypt, and then later in the year, two decrees were put into effect—administrative regulations 47 and 48—to deny them rights they had thus far availed.

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Back in Nicosia, Sebai's murder had wreaked havoc in the lobby of the Hilton on that morning of February 18. As per most reports, he was shot inside and not outside the hotel, as mentioned above. The meeting of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) had been disrupted,

and the two assassins had rounded up the delegates in the hotel cafeteria and held them captive. They threatened to kill them with hand grenades as they bargained with the Cypriot authorities, demanding to speak directly with the minister of interior, Christodoulos Veniamin, for safe passage to the Larnaca International Airport, as well as for an airplane—both of which they were granted. They singled out the Arab men in the room, instructed them to undo their ties from their necks, then to use them to rope each other's hands behind their backs, as the assassins escorted them with their guns onto a bus, while releasing all the women as well as the non-Arab rest.

Sadat was furious. Not only had Sebai been killed—in direct retaliation to his diplomatic doings—but four of the eleven hostages were Egyptian. He went as far as to accuse Cyprus of colluding with the militants and if not that then of abetting them by having insufficient security stationed. There was even a round of suspicion as to why Nicosia had been chosen as the venue for the AAPSO conference, when safer locations such as Moscow and Berlin had been proposed during the planning and preparation stages.

Sadat was quick to level allegations against Yasser Arafat as well; that this was an operation ordered by him. But the leader of the PLO had at least one of his own representatives caught in the crisis and was the first to call Spyros Kyprianou, the Cypriot president, to extend armed assistance—an experienced twelve or maybe sixteen man squad equipped with Soviet AK-47 assault rifles—were it needed. The offer was accepted in good faith and a plane was sent to Beirut to collect them.

At some point the assailants identified themselves. They belonged to a militant faction whose leader Sabri Al Banna had broken off from Arafat's political party Fatah back in 1974, which had then in turn issued a death warrant on him. The splinter group, which was first called the Fatah Revolutionary Council (FRC), was also known as the Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO). Its politics were aggressively rejectionist, and as a radical outfit its primary objective was to eliminate key figures seen to be enemies of the Palestinian people, especially Arabs who held too moderate a stance toward Israel.

Aboard a Cyprus Airways DC-8, the assassins-turned-hijackers commanded the civil aviation crew to head toward Tripoli, but to their surprise, and despite the hostage situation, they were not allowed to land. They possibly tried Damascus and then Aden, but at both locations they were told the same thing. In a final attempt they managed to touch down in Djibouti—it was about 4 or 5 am. While one of the hostages—it was Veniamin, who had offered himself as an emissary—was able to step off the aircraft and eventually get onto a telex line with Cyprus, the rest were not sanctioned to disembark. They spent the day there appealing to various governments for assistance, and eventually refueled the aircraft and headed right back to Larnaca—it was early evening on February 19 by then.

In the meantime, Sadat had grown really restless. Despite the assurance Kyprianou had given him—that he was handling the matter himself—the Egyptian president was scarcely comforted, thinking that Cyprus had long harbored Palestinian militants. He was determined to

get involved in the rescue attempt and decided to order his special commando unit Task Force 777 to interfere. He dispatched them to Larnaca in a C-130H military transport plane without informing the Cypriot president what he intended—this by itself was already a disregard for the sovereignty of the other state, a violation of international norms even. Led by General Nabil Shukry, the assault team included around seventy personnel, most of whom were in combat gear, although some were disguised as if for an undercover expedition, wearing bellbottom denims and platform shoes, or sportswear.

The aviation authorities were led to believe that Egypt's minister of information was arriving to observe the negotiations, and thus although the aircraft raised some eyebrows it landed at around 6:40 pm without any hassle, parking itself within a kilometer of the DC-8. When Cypriot officials went over to greet a member of cabinet, they were stunned to find a full-fledged Special Forces unit as well. When this was conveyed to Kyprianou in the control tower, the Egyptian ambassador was summoned from the plane. It was made clear to him that there was no permission for a commando raid. Failure to comply and the Cypriot National Guard would not hesitate to attack them.

Meanwhile, a series of exchanges with the hijackers had been underway—a push, pull and wait game on the tarmac was being played. Vassos Lyssarides, the vice president of the AAPSO committee, had taken charge, reaching an agreement at around 7:30 p.m. or so to hand over passports to the militants that had their photos—to be taken onsite with a Polaroid camera being called in from the city—so that they could exit easily. The Cypriot armed forces and plain-clothes police snipers were concealed so as not to provoke anything, but this made Shukry, who had overheard something on the radio communication, assume that the hijackers were going to get away. He did not know that Kyprianou's plan was to arrest them once the hostages—who had started brushing their teeth and combing their hair—were released.

At around 8:30 p.m., the Egyptian minister of information returned to the C-130H. He informed the commanding officer in English, and in the presence of the Cypriot chief of police, what had been discussed—that they were not authorized to intervene. But then the Egyptians started to speak with each other in Arabic. And it was soon after this that the tail of the Egyptian aircraft dropped, and a jeep charged out with four men firing blindly into the dark. It headed for the DC-8, which didn't retaliate. Following suit, down the ramp, the rest of the troops marched on, but at an almost leisurely pace. Was this a decoy? A deliberate diversion, so that the actual killer team could get its act underway? At least one Western military observer seemed to ask this question.

A fifty-minute gun battle ensued on the runway between the Egyptian Task Force 777 and the Cypriot National Guard and what had started as murder ended in massacre. The jeep blew up with the four men in it. The plane too was badly damaged by a shell and eleven other Egyptian commandos were slain. At one point, the so-called crack anti-terrorist unit were shooting at the tower in which Cyprus' president was sitting and his soldiers had no choice but to ambush them. By the end of it, the Egyptian forces surrendered, having taken cover under an empty airliner,

another sixteen injured. Astonished at the outbreak of violence, the hijackers too were persuaded by the DC-8's civilian pilots to turn themselves in.

It was an episode of diplomatic idiocy at best, and yet Sadat claimed credit for having solved the hostage crisis. As soon as his surviving commandos were deported, he cut official ties with Cyprus—later calling Kyprianou “a political dwarf,” and saying, “Cyprus must explain to me the treachery that was committed against my sons,” while almost in tears. He also remained convinced that Arafat had colluded against his fighters when in fact the PLO squad from Beirut had not even fired a bullet. When the ANO assassins were put on trial, he demanded they be given capital punishment. They were sent to death row at first, but then when Cyprus commuted the sentence to life imprisonment—on procedural grounds as well as for not wanting to alienate certain Palestinian factions—Sadat tried to insist that as Sebai's murderers they should be transferred to Egypt to be properly dealt with.

He welcomed his surviving men home as national heroes, and the fifteen who died were honored at a grand funeral as having sacrificed their lives for the eleven hostages. But besides the U.S. and Israel, who were willing to praise his bravado regardless, all other nations saw this for what it was: The Egyptian soldiers were victims of the irresponsible behavior of their government, is how a Soviet newspaper put it.

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In the summer that followed, the fault lines of a complex web of relations between Cyprus, Egypt and the PLO were reorganized and reimposed, and repercussions of this would be felt at the magazine called *Lotus*.

It's hard to tell whether Youssef El Sebai's last editorial, which only appeared in print after he had passed away, was specifically intended for the thematic issue on “Africa” in which it was included. Titled “The Historic Cultural Task of the Afro-Asian Intelligentsia,” it covered more or less the same ground as what he had produced for the launch of the journal a decade prior—that article had been called “The Role of AFRO-ASIAN Literature and the National Liberation Movements.” Marked for the months of April-September 1978, the posthumous volume was co-edited by South African writer Alex La Guma who had probably stepped up as deputy secretary-general from his position as assistant editor at the last minute. And it was this issue no. 36/37 that also concluded Cairo's term: Dar al-Odaba was no longer the Permanent Bureau of the Afro-Asian Writers Association.

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Soon after the Permanent Bureau of the Afro-Asian Writers Association in Cairo folded, a poet from Pakistan by the name of Faiz Ahmed Faiz arrived



*Lotus, Afro-Asian Writings, no. 59, Beirut, 1988.*

in Beirut to take over the chief editorship of *Lotus*. Both the man and the magazine had relocated from different places to be granted home and hospitality by the Union of Palestinian Writers, many of whose members were probably there as exiles themselves. Mahmoud Darwish was responsible for the Arabic edition, and Yasser Arafat also became involved in an occasional advisory capacity. Curious then is this: Why were the PLO so invested in *Lotus*, extending in-house resources to revive it? And what made Faiz leave Lahore—at the age of 67 no less—to set up base in the midst of it? Though the worst may not have happened yet, the Lebanese Civil War was well underway by then. The year was 1978.

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When Mike mentioned his fascination with the assassination of Youssef El Sebai, I had had a faint sensation that I knew about this already, like I'd come across it elsewhere. But up until then, as far as my fixation with the magazine went, there was no reason for *Lotus* to have even been before Beirut. It was the idea of this Urdu poet moving to that city which was soon to be sacked that had been my hook. Clearly I was there more on a whim, asserting my own angle of incidence onto things, as if it were that of Faiz.

We were the only two customers in the café that morning, and had taken the liberty of asking the waiters to turn off the disco-pop—the one thing reminding us of the present. The high ceilings and the hardwood floors, the placemats with images of long ago, had all probably contributed in some subconscious measure to the air of our exchange, and as we whirled our way into Cyprus, time curved around us from another direction and I was left with no indication of when we were anymore.

It was in fact as he spoke of Cyprus that some sort of undefined awareness had surfaced. “What was this Egyptian editor guy called again?” I imagine myself having asked. And while I can still hear Mike's voice in my head pronounce “youssefelsebai” just as he always does—like a word that I would never have been able to spell—in that moment the name itself had drawn a blank. In any case, it had felt far too early in the morning to be making notes, so I had carried on listening, and let the whole thing pass.

All of which is to say, I was sure I had no sense of Sebai, and thus no cause to dwell on my unlikely knowledge of this piece of the puzzle that was his demise. It was only over time and on its own terms, as my research expanded and I started to put more of it together, that I too found myself perplexed by the pivotal role his death had played in a certain unraveling of the not-so Non-Aligned/Pan-Arab nexus—it was after all the event around which so much had turned. But a trace of a vague familiarity lingered... somewhere at the back of things.

Recently, when I walked past the place where Mike and I had first encountered each other's affinity for *Lotus*, I found that it was all boarded up. The café had only been open a couple of years and now it was soon to be like it had never occurred.

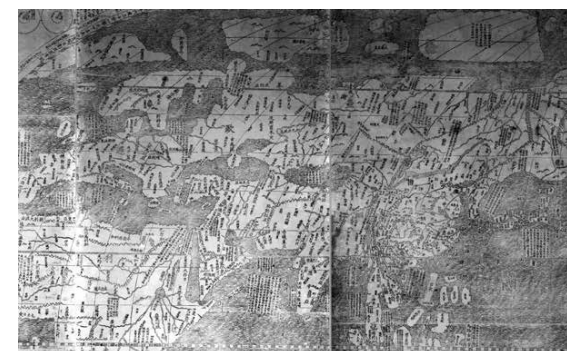
## Pan-Asianism and the Question: “What is Asia?”

James T. Hong

The story of Pan-Asianism is indelibly linked to the actions of Japan from the late nineteenth century until its defeat in the Second World War. It was Imperial Japan that gave Pan-Asianism a prescriptive political meaning by employing the idea as a government-sanctioned, holy mission. Without Japan's championing of a “New Order in East Asia,” Pan-Asianism as a reactionary ideology is naive at best and incoherent at worst. The fundamental weakness of the early, inchoate Pan-Asianist dream is precisely the vagueness of the concept of “Asia.” The second and fatal Pan-Asianist flaw is the inscription of Japanese superiority into the very fabric of Pan-Asianist dogma, which resulted in the murder and unnecessary deaths of millions.

### What is Asia?

“Asia” as a geographical term purportedly comes from the Ancient Greeks; it was later adapted by the Romans, and then eventually defined as a continental landmass conceptually detached from the European continent. The geographical borders of continents such as Antarctica or Australia are clear even to primary school students, but the border between Europe and Asia has shifted throughout time and continues to be contentious, with a number of scholars denying any meaningful



“Asia” in Matteo Ricci's 1602 world map.

geographical break between Europe and Asia at all. Since the notion of a unitary and distinct entity called “Asia” is of European origin, its widespread acceptance is just one example of what Martin Heidegger deemed “the complete Europeanization of the earth and man.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesuit scholars first introduced the concept of “Asia” to China in the late sixteenth century. In 1602, Matteo Ricci, one of the first Jesuits to seriously take up the study of classical Chinese, printed a map in the Chinese language that introduced the term “亞細亞” (Asia). What is now East Asia was then culturally dominated by China in a “premodern” system of tributary relations. Hierarchical, this tributary system placed China (or specifically a dynasty within China) at the politico-cultural center and can be called the “Sinocentric Order.” Educated Chinese during dynastic rule did not see themselves as just one part of a regional bloc. For them, the most basic differentiation between peoples was that which existed between civilization and barbarism.

1 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 15.