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ISSUE

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# FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW

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DECEMBER 2009 US\$15/HK\$120

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## FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW

FOUNDED 1946

DECEMBER 2009 VOLUME 172, NUMBER 10

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Published ten times a year, on the first Friday of every month except February and August.

© Review Publishing Company Limited,  
Hong Kong, 2009  
A wholly owned subsidiary of Dow Jones

Visit our Web site at [www.feer.com](http://www.feer.com)

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Advertising inquiries: [adservices@feer.com](mailto:adservices@feer.com)  
Printed in Hong Kong by Paramount Printing Co. Ltd.  
Icon illustrations: Steven Salerno  
Cover illustration: Tim Foley  
Layout by Ruth Abella

**DOWJONES**  
道瓊斯

PUBLISHER: Review Publishing Company Ltd.  
CURRENCY NOTE: All currency references in the REVIEW are to U.S. dollars unless otherwise indicated. ARTICLE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES: All articles submitted to the

FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW must be exclusive to the REVIEW. We prefer that the submission be between 2,000 and 5,000 words, with a cover letter giving a brief summary of your article along with the author's fax number, day and evening phone numbers, mailing address and email addresses. All articles should be sent by email to [hugo.restall@feer.com](mailto:hugo.restall@feer.com).

# Elegy for a Colonial Perspective

A former REVIEW contributing editor reflects on what made the magazine successful in its heyday, and why the passing of the region's old elite makes producing regional media more difficult.

by Bruce Gilley

**I**T WOULD BE easy to attribute the demise of the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW to the shifting economics of the media industry. After all, hundreds of newspapers and magazines have gone down the tubes in recent years under the combined weight of the Internet and economic recession. But if that were the case, it would also be easy to identify the new and emerging outlets of authoritative Asian news and analysis that had eaten the REVIEW's bento box.

In fact, there is no such thing, on paper or online. While new academic journals on the region have sprung up, an Asiaphile in search of news on the region will be totally stumped. This is remarkable when one considers that Asia Pacific has one-third of the world's population; the proportion rises to half if South Asia is included. For many decades, the REVIEW was the magazine of record for this sprawling and diverse region. How is it that Asia has disappeared as a media proposition

while the region has boomed as an economic and even political proposition?

The Economist explained in a recent column that the REVIEW's demise was a result of the increasingly specialized tastes of Asian consumers, which are better reached via local publications. But the REVIEW never catered to Asia's emerging middle class, whose parents were peasants when the magazine was gathering momentum. The Asia that the REVIEW supposedly lost was not the one on which it built its success. Rather, its Asia has disappeared and will not return. That was the Asia of the colonial mind—and not in a pejorative sense.

For several decades spanning the era of late colonialism in the 1950s to the spread of intense globalization in the early 1990s, a unique cultural niche sprang up in Asia. It was a transitory and transnational community peopled by Western expats—diplo-

Mr. Gilley is assistant professor of political science at Portland State University. He was a REVIEW correspondent and then contributing editor from 1995 to 2002.

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mats, executives, scholars and travelers—and local Asian elites in business, government and education who were themselves products of the colonial era.

In light of the region's past and future, it is remarkable that this niche existed at all. But for a few decades, it was possible to speak of a certain epistemic community of Asia-hands and Asian elites who shared a perspective on the region's development. It was an Asia that was neither parochial nor Western but colonial—an in-between place of mutual understanding and shared perspectives and goals. That Asia has now disappeared, like a whole continent subducted under powerful new forces of localism and globalization. With it goes the REVIEW.

Perhaps what is most surprising about this period was the local audience, which was often bombastically anti-Western. Yet the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru, Lee Kuan Yew, Ferdinand Marcos and Mahathir Mohamad shared an essentially colonial mentality about their region and their countries. This mentality was one of seeing certain universals in the struggle for development and governance, while affirming certain limits relating to the cultural particularities of each place. This niche allowed the REVIEW to cater to a diverse region. The British empire lorded it over many of the entrepôts where the REVIEW sold best—Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, India. Politics was about stability, economics was about state-led growth, and business was about intricate social and cultural networks.

Amid all the jousting that the REVIEW undertook in piercing the pretensions of local elites—and finding itself or its reporters in the dock in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam

and Pakistan—the magazine was essentially aligned with their perspectives on the region. Lee Kuan Yew may have hated the REVIEW, but only in a narrow sense of a fraternal fight, the way that Chiang Kai-shek hated Mao Zedong. In a broader sense they were cut from the same cloth and spoke the same language. They all saw Asia from the perspective of colonial governors, which is why they so feared democracy and its localizing impulses. When the legendary Derek Davies, editor from 1964-89, died in 2002, the New York Times obituary commented that he had “built the magazine into a major source of news and comment on the region despite his love-hate relationship with its prickly rulers.” As time passed, the love grew but the lovers died off.

Longtime Asia correspondent Jonathan Manthorpe wrote in October: “The FEER was sometimes criticized by Asian nationalists for being an English language publication, written by Western journalists, and catering to regional elites. In many ways these three qualities were some of its strengths.” And those Asian nationalists knew it. It is somehow fitting that in October, just as Dow Jones announced the demise of the REVIEW, Singapore's high court upheld a 2008 defamation ruling against the magazine. It was a faint echo from the past when Asian leaders cared deeply about the perspectives of a weekly magazine run by boozey expats. Lee Kuan Yew, without a hint of irony, described the REVIEW as “reputable, august and authoritative” while suing it for defamation in 1989. The Orient as a media proposition could never exist without the Orientalists.



Once that essentially colonial perspective gave way to today's cacophony of local and Western perspectives, no regional magazine selling a singular perspective could survive.

To understand the cultural niche that the REVIEW occupied, two British novels are essential: Graham Greene's 1956 classic *The Quiet American* and John le Carré's 1977 bestseller *The Honourable Schoolboy*. Greene's novel is important because it illustrates the monstrous illusion that somehow the REVIEW's failure was a result of Americanization—in particular Dow Jones's full takeover of the magazine in 1986-87 and the replacement of its British editor, Philip Bowring, by a very quiet American, Gordon Crovitz, in 1992. Mr. Bowring was heir to the colonial perspective at the REVIEW, which had been most fully expressed under the leadership of Davies, a former British spy in Vietnam.

In Greene's novel, this perspective is represented by Thomas Fowler, a boozy, cynical, empathetic and well-informed British journalist covering the French wars in Vietnam. The novel leaves little doubt that we are supposed to sympathize with Fowler, who is contrasted to the quiet American, Alden Pyle, the East Coast American with transformative universal theories who does not really understand or care about the region except as a test case for bigger propositions. "Isms and ocracies. Give me facts," Fowler says, "I don't take sides. I'll still be reporting whoever wins."

Mr. Bowring and others from the British wing of the REVIEW frequently attributed the magazine's demise to this transition from the Fowlers to the Pyles. It is true that the takeover and makeover by Dow Jones did little to help. But the ship was already sinking because the Asia that the REVIEW had catered to was disappearing. Newer Asian elites were not interested in the colonial perspective, British or American. To blame it on Pyle is to tell

oneself a comforting story that the colonial perspective would have continued to attract readers in Asia. It could not. A continued Fowler ascendancy would have attracted a smaller, if more fanatically loyal, audience. In Greene's novel, Fowler's loss of his mistress Phuong to Pyle—as the British loss of the REVIEW to Dow Jones—elicits a stream of anti-American invective from Fowler. He is at least big enough to admit that "what I hated was the future."

*The Honourable Schoolboy* traces the same illusions while explaining the earlier successes. Le Carré thanks "Derek Davies and his staff at the Far Eastern Economic Review" in the preface. The central character, old Craw, is based on Richard Hughes, "Far East correspondent" for the Sunday Times who wrote a column for the REVIEW from 1971-83. Craw, an Australian journalist, "had covered the Communists against Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang against the Japanese and the Americans against practically everyone" and "had shaken more sand out of his shorts ... than most of them would ever walk over."

Michael Vatikiotis, the last great Fowler of the magazine as editor from 2001-04, put it thus: "Increasingly, the media that survives is local and circulates in Asia's larger cities, rather than between them." Mr. Vatikiotis's idea of media catering to an increasingly Balkanized readership is echoed by others. Mr. Manthorpe lamented that "FEER currently has no successor and that there is no publication in Asia, either on processed dead trees or the Web, that has a regional focus or authoritative voice."

But the implicit conceit is that there is some shared Asian perspective that might replace the colonial one as "authoritative" and assert itself as a media proposition for some new entrepreneur. Many have tried—local media moguls in Japan, Thailand and even Hong Kong. But they fail time and again. Asiaweek, the weekly magazine that tried to be the postcolonial alternative

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to the REVIEW, folded in 2001, and with much less gnashing of teeth from Asian readers. There was no "Asia for the Asians" to be had. The fact that Asia briefly had such an identity—one to which the REVIEW catered admirably—was a direct and fleeting result of the colonial project of postwar development. In the future, the REVIEW will be studied because it reflects the possibilities of a supranational identity in Asia that subsequent generations will find scarcely imaginable.

The colonial perspective provided the only possible authoritative outlook on the region because it alone had a sufficient breadth, liberality of spirit and insistence on minimal principles of good government that could unite elites into a common purpose. I risk the opprobrium of hundreds of Western and Western-influenced academics brandishing Edward Said's *Orientalism* to explain how the REVIEW was complicit in an imperial project. So be it. Because what may replace this unique period of shared understanding created by the colonial perspective is a return to a feudalism created by the postcolonial one—each to his own castle, there to nurse grievances and secret musings.

Will Asia's elites ever develop a renewed perspective on the region to replace the colonial one—which some aspiring media outlet might serve? Might a China-centered mentality silently envelop younger minds and become the basis for new media that provides a regional perspective now missing? This future is coming. Perhaps it should not be feared. If anything threatens the integration and peace of Asia more than China's rise it is the lack of shared values and perspectives among Asian elites. The REVIEW reflected and served, perhaps even abetted, such a perspective for 40 years during its glory days. Asia needs a new regional perspective to replace it.

The history of postwar Asia is a history of Western involvement, a fact much lamented by radical professors but one through which the region's institutions and economies grew. Alongside that was a set of readers, local and expat, who were participants in this essentially colonial project. As newly democratic and developed Asian countries graduated to developed-world status, their younger generations had no need for this perspective. If they want a Western perspective they turn to coverage of Asia in Western publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, or *The Financial Times*. If not, they turn to their local media. The Asia of the REVIEW is today found only in the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong.

The FCC is a fitting place to end. Its main bar was a crossroads for Asia and its membership a white pages of REVIEW alumni. The old cold storage building it still occupies—holding milk in early days and cadavers in World War II—is a gem of colonial architecture. Its reporter members fled from communism in China in 1949, along with a million others. REVIEW journalists headed the FCC on several occasions. The Club continues as a club, but less and less as a cultural milieu.

The FCC makes several appearances in *The Honourable Schoolboy*. At the end, old Craw reappears at the main bar "looking much aged and soberly dressed." Overhearing some members saying how things are changing and how the Club should change too, he stomps out, "tears pouring down his face." "Don't change anything," he shouts, shaking his stick in fury. "The old order changeth not, let it all run on."

The assembled, younger members smile sympathetically. Old Craw contributed much. But his time is done. "Past it, they agreed, as the doors closed on him. Poor fellow." ■