Jaroslav Krejci. *Before the European Challenge: The Great Civilizations of Asia and the Middle East*

John K. Hord

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risk of running aground here in the shoals of historical “present-centredness.” Villas Rojas’s text, without ever being coercive to the reader, brings the reader to realize that just as the archeo-Mayanist searches for clues and traces into the splendorous Mayan past, so does the ethnohistorian who observes contemporary Mayan communities. The situation (that of the archeo-Mayanist and the ethnohistorian) is one where science seeks knowledge of “reality,” and reality shows itself to be a pluriaxial metaphor of Time.

As is customary in León Portilla’s scholarly trajectory, critical and polemic issues are brought to the surface, compared and contrasted with the most recent scholarship to the time of publication, and re-integrated into what León Portilla introduces with the assertion: “once again I join the ‘dialogue’ of those concerned with time and space in the thought of the Maya,” a dialogue he rejoins in order to bring his research to a disciplinary parity with current developments in the knowledge of the notions of time and space in a fascinating civilization.

Yet, it seems to me, there is a larger problem that this book addresses in an indirect way, one not as fascinating as it is troubling. Mayan studies, like so many other fields of study in the human sciences, are becoming fragmented. Mayanists from different countries, due to circumstances that restrain or limit their way of doing research, are reduplicating efforts and their knowledge is progressively becoming an in-bred discourse. When León Portilla surveys “nooks and crannies” of hypotheses about the notions of time and space in Mayan civilization he seems to be rearranging different views into a more cohesive corpus of consensus. The reason is that, for instance, US Mayanists, European and Latin American Mayanists seem not to be reading each other’s investigations, so that each regional group of scholars is doing all the work by themselves, all over again. Even in this extradisciplinary aspect, this book has a message to offer us. If Mayan studies become nationally circumscribed, we will have in a couple of decades as many Mayan civilizations as there are nation-bound mayanists.

Elpidio Laguna

A COMPARATIVE TEXT


This is a textbook. It is somewhat difficult to call it an introductory textbook, because the average or even the fairly well-informed American high-school graduate would find himself hopelessly out of his depth in these studies. In effect it is a textbook for an honors-program introduction to non-Western civilizations. It is also a good refresher for
the scholar who wants to brush up on those civilizations in which he
does not personally specialize—speaking as a comparativist who feels
himself reasonably well-read on most of history, I found it was a rare
page in this book from which I did not learn something, or which would
not at least provoke an argument. The author has no objection at all to
discussing philosophical issues from each civilization using its own la-
bebels, or making normal use of such words as fainéant and such sentences
as "it seems that mythopoeic thinking never disappeared from Indian
culture and in Indian philosophy it was not the syllogism but the para-
dox which became the most popular ploy." The student who tackles this
book will need a fair level of familiarity with Western history and philos-
ophy first, just for the sake of basic concepts. But learning from it will
be a rewarding experience.

This is not to say that the book is without faults; it is, after all, impos-
sible for an introductory text to satisfy everyone, or for that matter,
anyone. The sections on Islam and Japan are particularly good and the
book is especially recommended for courses that plan to emphasize
those areas. But in some other regional studies the hallowed, conven-
tional explanations are repeated without examination even when any
analysis from an outside viewpoint would cast serious doubt on them.
For example, the book repeats the old saw concerning geographical
determinism in Egypt and Mesopotamia: Egypt, being the child of the
stable and predictable Nile and without serious barbarian threat along
most of her border, developed a worldview stressing peace and harmo-
ny; Mesopotamia, child of the restless Tigris and Euphrates and perma-
nently under barbarian threat from both desert and mountains, became
pessimistic and emphasized impermanence. If this is so, then why did
China, child of the most famously disorderly river in the world and
under barbarian threat from all directions, develop the most famous
philosophies of harmony in the world? One may also cite the occasional
questionable interpretation:

It seems that by its very nature, Buddhism lacked the capacity to
become a viable backbone of a supranational civilization. A religion
which is to become a socially integrative force has to show a more
determined effort in this direction. Buddhism scored integrative suc-
cesses only on a more or less national basis, such as in Tibet and
South-East Asia in particular, and to some extent in Japan. Based as it
was mainly on the monasteries for monks and nuns (and, unlike other
great religions, lacking a local clergy with pastoral concern for the
laity), and being too dependent on the support of secular authorities,
Buddhism was particularly vulnerable to the effects of persecution.
On the other hand its readiness to accept symbiosis with other cults
was favourable to its survival wherever religious pluralism was accept-
ed as a way of life.

During the period AD 300-1000 Buddhism was a principal vehicle of
civilization in both northeastern India (under the Gupta through Pala
dynasties) and China (under the Western Chin through T'ang dynas-
ties), and from India it spread to Sri Lanka and the many nations of
Southeast Asia, from China to Korea and Japan; it was diverse enough
to satisfy the highly cultured Chinese, the more peripheral (at the
time) Japanese, the high-mountain Tibetans and the steppes-nomadic
Mongols; and the most remarkable structures of these countries in their
Buddhist periods are not monasteries but temples and other religious
objects. Nor is a Christian-style clergy necessary to the maintenance of
a great religion; Islam has never had such. Thus one must suspect that
Professor Krejci wrote a bit too hastily in such paragraphs as this one.
But they are few, and it is always useful to have a few such questionable
observations in a textbook to keep the students sceptical.

The potential user will also want to know the style of this book, the
type and manner of Prof. Krejci's arguments. The following quotation
comes from the first major study in the book, describing, comparing
and contrasting Egypt and Mesopotamia:

The most conspicuous common feature is their mythopoeic
thought, which is far from being peculiar to these two civilizations
alone. For the modern mind, mythopoeic thought is difficult to fol-
low. Lacking any logic, as we understand it, knowing no definite de-
marcation between fantasy and real experience, it confronts us with a
world which we can make at best tentative efforts to comprehend.
Nevertheless even with this mythopoeic world-view, these people were
able to invent useful tools, harness natural resources and build up a
functioning societal organization on a large scale. Although compul-
sion, too, had an important subsidiary role to play, the common be-
ief in the myths underlying the rationale of the state, so to speak, was
the main spontaneous source of social cohesion.

With respect to the organization of those societies issues emerged
which were only to a small extent peculiar to the two civilizations.
More often than not these issues were of a general nature; we shall
meet them, in variations great and small, in other societies which we
shall discuss on our journey along the paths of civilization. If we give
them more space in this chapter than we shall give to similar issues in
other civilizations, it is because, to our knowledge, they appear here
for the first time in world history. We want to show the ubiquitous
nature of these issues, and thus provide the reader with material from
which he or she can draw their own conclusions.

Another feature the two civilizations had in common was the type
of agricultural production, which in both instances was based on an
elaborate irrigation system in an otherwise arid alluvial plain of river
valleys. The fact that the first civilizations in history, not only in Me-
sopotamia and Egypt but also in the Indus and Yellow River valleys,
depended on irrigation rather than rainfall is well-known and the
explanation—that such a type of agriculture required more co-oper-
ation and the organization of large communities than elsewhere—is
also widely accepted. We need not go beyond this point and get in-
volved in Wittfogel's generalizations about 'hydraulic agriculture' giving rise to 'agrohydraulic despotism' [there is a reference to Wittfogel at this point]. At best we can accept the term 'agrohydraulic' as denoting a certain technique, without any further implications concerning the political or cultural framework. Further discussion may help to explain and substantiate our reservations on this point.

The striking contrast between ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt lies in the psychological dimension. On the one hand we have the artistically-endowed Egyptian, confident in his ability to cope with his (in principle orderly) human and natural environment; on the other hand there is the more technically talented inhabitant of Mesopotamia who had to develop a wider range of capabilities in order to cope with the unpredictable world around him. In a turbulent political history, marked by waves of large-scale immigration and by conquests, the people of Mesopotamia were more innovative in terms of practical discoveries and technology, whilst the more sheltered Egyptians, who only occasionally experienced ethnic turmoil, showed greater achievements in art and in religious speculation.

It is clear that the agrohydraulic mode of production was not enough by itself to shape identical or even similar cultures. There were other, more fundamental, ecological circumstances, which contributed to the shaping of human dispositions; various dispositions framed different courses of action, which in their turn reinforced—by the accumulation of differences—the environmental impetus. We shall discuss this environmental factor in more detail in section 2.4.

The book is old-fashioned in its content, making no attempt at all to address currently hot minority issues, least of all in politically correct ways. As a general text for non-Western civilizations it is somewhat harmed by a lack of attention to sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. But in all, the book is firmly recommended for libraries and for the personal shelves of comparativists who want reasonably detailed general histories handy for personal reference. It is also recommended as a textbook, with the caveat that this is not for the student whose main interest is putting a required course on his record.

John K. Hord

AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN AND WITHIN CIVILIZATIONS


When two civilizations meet several things may result for their people, depending on various factors: Is the meeting among equals? Is the meeting the result of voluntary migration, or involuntary migration? Is the meeting skewed in favor of one civilization? It the meeting the re-