



10-1-2001

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Elji Hattori
Reitaku University, Japan

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Recommended Citation

Hattori, Elji (2001) "Reorienting the Cultural World Order: Letter 7 From *Letters From the Silk Roads*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 45 : No. 45 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol45/iss45/3>

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REORIENTING THE CULTURAL WORLD ORDER: LETTER 7, FROM *LETTERS FROM THE SILK ROADS*¹

EIJI HATTORI

Dear Friend,

Standing at the dawn of a new year, I am thinking of the skies of faraway Japan. As you know, European skies in winter are dark and cold, as if they symbolize that for a number of years world history has been too severely darkened and distorted to allow the unclouded sun to shine through.

A New World Order is a concept of a world in the process of revision and reconstruction that has been talked about for many years. It doesn't mean the "New World Order" that America began to speak of after the collapse of the old Soviet Union. At first it was a way of thinking of the New World Economic Order adopted by the United Nations in the 70's, and from that was born the conception called the New Information Order which was supposed to correct the qualitative and quantitative gaps among nations as well as the one-way flow of information around the world. However, I consider that culture must certainly be a central problem in the 21st century. It could be called the challenge of a "new world cultural order."

It has been pointed out again and again that, at the root of almost all the disputes of humanity, lies the ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. The income differential between the presently developing nations and the more secure advanced nations has been increasing. In the Middle Ages the ratio of rich to poor was probably 1 to 3. At present the number has become 1 to 15 or even 1 to 30. Although there have been some exceptions in the newly industrialized nations of Southeast Asia and in the oil producing nations, there is a tendency for the further growth in this disparity to go on apace. The Third World feels extreme impatience with this. The rise of a common feeling among the more than one hundred Non-Aligned Nations reflects nothing less than this intense impatience.

To say, "Economic development is nothing but the result of the effort of a people; any lag in growth is that people's responsibility," is an absurd remark. Not only does it reflect ignorance of the structure of

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 2001

the present world economy, it also fails to recognize the vast scars left over from colonialism. Colonialism means economic exploitation and robbery, such as shown by the East India companies that received many hundreds of times of return on their relatively small investments, or the purchase of Manhattan Island from the Indians for some round beads and a knife worth about \$24. It is also a history of slaughter and destruction as seen in the examples of the Aztec and Inca civilizations. Furthermore, it is the history of human enslavement, of which the remaining scars are visible even today on the Ivory Coast and on the Senegalese Gorée Island. Were it not for colonialism, the empire of Mali would probably have continued to exist in Africa, and two of the colonial countries of Indochina—Cambodia and Vietnam—would not have met with their recent tragedies.

Friend, I spoke just now of “human enslavement.” I did not say, “slave trading” because I wanted to mention the more universal enslavement of mind and spirit experienced by great numbers of people. It is not just the fact of trade in human beings. Human enslavement involves far more than the economic factor alone. We may, with even more justice, call it the greatest crime committed by colonialism. It was the “enslavement of the spirit” in the colonized nations.

How many colonial peoples and nations have lost their own languages! Or else their own languages are regarded as “second languages.” In such cases, they must encounter a death of the inner spirit, or of what Americans call *spunk*. A language is itself a culture, and we must recognize culture as a system of values. When one value system rules another value system, then that brings about a complete master-servant relationship between the two nations or peoples, and the master will never try to appreciate the servant on equal terms.

I recall the conversation I once had with a scholar from Morocco, published by *Le Monde* (the French newspaper). He said, “The New World Economic Order was a ‘stillborn baby’ . . . All our efforts collided with a cultural barrier, and we cannot get past it . . .”

Culture indeed is a people’s soul. It is their dignity, their very existence or being. It is solely by means of culture that a people possesses sovereignty.

“The ability of Poland, during the ordeal of two world wars, to maintain its national sovereignty in spite of being dismembered and occupied, depended solely on its culture.” These are the words uttered in June of 1979 by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his visit to UNESCO. Colonialism has stolen this sovereignty from many nations

and peoples—by education. And whenever sovereignty is lost, then at that very moment genuine dialogue becomes nonexistent. This is how I would unravel the meaning of “cultural barriers.”

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A culture originally enriches itself by encountering other cultures; such meetings will create new and revitalized traditions. Often the word “traditional” is used as though it were synonymous with “past” or “bygone,” but I think tradition is something that must be very much alive in the here and now. Even if we think of modern France as the synonym of culture, we should realize that its culture does not remain just as it was in ancient Gaul. No culture remains throughout time just as it was. Because of its geographical setting, French culture through the ages has encountered many highly heterogeneous cultures. Out of those encounters a new cultural synthesis has emerged which is the result of a compilation of cultures.

The same situation exists in Japan. The nation has absorbed everything into the special nurturing medium called the Japanese language and in the process has created its traditional culture in an ever-expanding form. Even the modernization of this nation since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 is not a phenomenon outside this framework. That, too, was due to cultural encounter, and what largely happened is the “Japanization of what was imported from the West” rather than the “Westernization of Japan”—exactly like the earlier Japanization of Buddhism when it was brought over from the Chinese continent.

However, when the master-servant relationship is established, the effect is that the one culture erases the other. What then emerges is a world ruled by the law of the jungle. There is no sadder state of affairs than a subjugation of spirit in which one learns to depreciate one’s own culture.

The problem is that, even after former colonies got their independence in the 1960’s, the aftereffects of colonialism remained as of old and threw large shadows on those countries’ true independence. Much unchanged education is being conducted under the name of “technical cooperation” in former colonies and is contributing unconsciously to maintaining the old master-slave subordination. What makes this harder to identify and cope with is that technical collaborators from foreign countries are almost always full of good intentions. This kind of movement is called the new colonialism. The expressions “cultural aggression” and “educational aggression” have been coined for it. However,

the voices of protest have not yet become loud enough or numerous enough to evoke an international cry for reform.

What is necessary now is the reform of consciousness. Asians and Africans should hold their heads high in cultural identities that are their own. Any look of secret contempt or lack of understanding must disappear from the eyes of outside collaborators "full of good intentions." That will involve a reform of consciousness including not only those in the developing countries but everyone. Toward that end, what must be done? Here I would like to mention the most basic thing. It is to understand that the image of world culture has hitherto contained a "warp." This "cultural warp" urgently needs correction. The need exists not at the level of specialized books but at the level of schoolbooks.

This warping has arisen from the fact that the history of world cultures has been written according to one viewpoint. Moreover, such cultural history is contained in any textbook of world history that has as its keynotes economics and military affairs; hence it is written as if cultural values are directly proportional to power relations. That is the viewpoint of Western Europe. It is, moreover, the viewpoint that learned the so-called perspective method born in the Renaissance. Accordingly, the structure of cultures in Hellenism and Christianity is made into a large close-up, and the cultural sphere outside the West has a much smaller and far more blurred existence. The world vision displayed on this distorted map uses the measures of material civilization inspired by natural science to evaluate the cultural values of other civilizations.

The problem is that this cultural image, which played a leading part in European thinking, entered the textbooks and has been distributed throughout the whole world since the colonial era. Japan is no exception because it strove to introduce translations of many Western works. As a result, new textbooks, such as those on Japanese history, had to be created—just as if Japan were outside world history. And even now worship of the West is still alive. Hiding at the bottom of such worship are its counterparts: discrimination, segregation, and ignorance of the people of Arabian, Asian, and African civilizations.

Here I would like to note what was done consciously or unconsciously to erase entire pages from the world's cultural history. For example, the Italian Renaissance was a revival of ancient Greece, and it was also the period during which Chinese arts were being imported. But this second point is not written about. It is as though there were something shameful about Europe's learning anything from a backwards

country such as China. While many pages are devoted to the history of Rome, the histories of Luoyang (Lo-yang) and Ch'ang-an², two cities of equal importance to Rome in their sphere, are not written about. In Ch'ang-an during the 8th-century Tang period, there was an influx from Japan of more than 2,000 overseas students, and the city states sending diplomatic missions to China amounted to 300. Now Japanese learn of Caesar but ignore Gao Zong (third emperor of the Tang dynasty).³ In fact, the Chinese influence of this period was so great that not only did it affect the planning of the Japanese cities of Nara and Kyoto but also all present-day university terminology such as "*kyōju*" (professor) and "*gakushi*" (bachelor). These terms used in the universities in Luoyang were introduced throughout Japan.

Another wonderful example is the fact that people all over the world, including Indians and Arabs, are taught that the 15th century is the period of explorers and discoveries. Why in the world do people, who have even older civilizations than Western Europe, need to be "discovered"? There are also many factual mistakes involved. The following example is pertinent whether one lives in America or India. Apart from whether America was discovered before Columbus by the Vikings, when we speak about precursors of great navigation, we must first cite the extraordinary expeditions of Zheng He (Cheng Ho) as the beginning of the Age of Great Voyages. His voyages totaled seven round trips, beginning in 1405 and involving several hundred great ships and tens of thousands of sailors. Starting from Canton, he led these expeditions to cross through the Malaccan Straits, to proceed from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf, and to extend as far as the east coast of Africa. He was pioneering in global navigation eighty-seven years before Columbus was seeking India, China, and Zipangu (the country of gold, Japan)⁴ and ninety-three years before Vasco da Gama's discovery of the Cape of Good Hope. In the case of da Gama, we need to note that the Arabian who was his pilot already knew the sea route that he was showing to da Gama. That man's name, as we saw in Letter 3, is Ahmed bin Majid.

When we look at the history of cultural interchange, we do see a huge amount of East-West cultural interchange, which started about A.D. 1, reached a climax in the 8th century, and has been continuing since then. The chief actors on the sea route were the Chinese, Indians, and Arabians, while on the overland silk route they were the Persians and Chinese. That interchange linked Greece and the Orient, and it sent oriental handicrafts to Europe and Africa. The Romans themselves went to far-away East Asia. When I reflect on such things, I must say that to

speak of the "discovery" voyages of the 15th century or of new continents "discovered" for the first time by Europeans during that century sounds really strange.

Friend, did you ever consider how to solve this strange puzzle? I think that, in fact, just as there had been isolation in Japan, so also there had been isolation in Western Europe. The explanation stems from the fact of the "crescent battle formation of Islam"⁵ referring to the power and influence of Islam from the 8th century to the 16th. From modern Turkey to the Persian Gulf, on both banks of the Red Sea, the crescent that spread throughout all of North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula almost encircled Europe. With the frigid Arctic Circle to the north and nothing but ocean to the west, Europe was thus isolated for several centuries. Consequently, for Europe the "discovery" of the East at the end of the 15th century, must be said to have been, in fact, a "rediscovery," but this word was mistakenly left out of the history textbooks written after the opening of the colonial period.⁶

I have spoken of "mistakes." But were they really mistakes? Even if Europeans experienced a period of isolation in their region, any European historian should have learned that these same Muslims who encircled Europe were carrying on trade by land and sea routes and were also making significant advances in science and technology. The Crusades of Christendom ended in military and religious failure, but because of the cultural interaction with Islam, important innovations were introduced in architectural techniques, mathematics, chemistry, and natural science. Why are those things not written down more clearly and distinctly in the West?

Surely there are persons studying philosophy who must be aware that the complete works of Aristotle were preserved in an Arabic translation without which they would not have been transmitted to the present. A well-informed student of philosophy would also be aware that the modern philosophies of Descartes and Kant are developments or antitheses of the scholastic philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas who was himself indebted to the Arabic versions translated into Latin for his own introduction to Aristotle, without which his own philosophy would have been impossible.

I cannot help but think that in cultural history the full story of this significant Islamic contribution to human civilization has been *intentionally* erased. If that is so, we must find the cause for such intentional omissions in the deep scars, grudges, and enmity left by what are called religious wars. Zheng He, mentioned earlier, planned to go to

Mecca on one of his voyages to fulfill his duty as a Moslem. Might this fact help explain the elimination of his name from history? I must add that Western histories had a similar purpose to the first Japanese history, the 8th-century A.D. *Kojiki*. Its purpose was to justify the government of the time.⁷

Now is the time for a universal human history to be written. It would seek to transcend ethnocentricity. Such a history should have an equitable viewpoint that respects the dignity of many cultures. Presupposing a rational approach, it should extol many virtues: esteem for life, harmony with nature, courtesy and respect, serenity, and compassion.⁸ In that way, the peoples of the world can escape the yoke of present-day hatreds and grudge-bearing and may be allowed and encouraged to take a new step forward.

Once André Malraux said to me, "The 21st century must become the century of global culture." He explained to me that the 20th century was one of war, as the 19th had been one of progress, but I feel he had a premonition that this new cultural order was necessary for the very existence of human beings.

Reitaku University, Japan

NOTES

¹ Eiji Hattori, *Letters from the Silk Roads: Thinking at the Crossroads of Civilization*. Translated by Wallace Gray. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2000. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.

² *Luoyang and Ch'ang-an*. *Luoyang* is important as the capital of several ruling dynasties and as a Buddhist center. Famous Buddhist caves were constructed south of the city by imperial order. *Ch'ang-an* (Xian) in the Tang period was equivalent to Rome at its peak when we look at cultural, commercial, scientific, even military influence. The capital was shifted back and forth between these two cities.

³ Gao Zong, also known as Kao-tzung or Li Chih, expanded the Tang empire to encompass Korea.

⁴ For the sake of completeness, we should explain that Columbus had been inspired by Marco Polo's book to try to find these countries. He was not seeking spices but gold.

⁵ The "crescent battle formation" is a poetic expression meaning that Islam surrounded Europe in the form of a crescent.

- ⁶ Serious matters deserve serious treatment, but sometimes humor relaxes and clarifies. An American bumper sticker reads: "In 1492 the Indians discovered Columbus lost at sea."
- ⁷ More specifically, the *Kojiki* was written by the Fujiwara clan to legitimize the imperial court by showing them to be descendants from the sun goddess, Amaterasu, and at the same time to give the *raison d'être* of the Fujiwara family as her minister.
- ⁸ This last, *benevolence* or *compassion* in Japanese, encompasses the Buddhist virtues of active benevolence, universal love, and loving-kindness. In these respects, it overlaps with the meaning of a Greek term for divine love, *Agapé*, which occupies the apex in the Christian hierarchy of values. There is also an equivalent to this concept in the Hebrew Bible, *hesed*, usually translated "loving-kindness" or "steadfast love."