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MAINSTREAM CIVILIZATIONS: A TRIAL ESSAY

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1. Foreword

In *Comparative Civilizations Review* No. 44, Matthew Melko provided a list with a title "Delineations of Civilizations" and he lists many "Mainstream Civilizations" as selected by 18 scholars. In this essay, he writes: "Why could we accept a list and not a definition? Probably because civilizations are complex, and it is difficult to agree about whether it is the possession of a certain set of traits, or the development of a level of technology, or size, or cities, or higher religion, or certain forms of government, or certain kinds of economies."¹

As Melko writes, I, too, cannot accept as "Mainstream" those civilizations named by the 18 scholars because I cannot find a constructive meaning in such analysis and classifications of those civilizations. For example, if I try to insert "Global Civilization" into the list, I have no method for doing so at all. The reason seems to me that those delineations by the 18 scholars are done based from a static viewpoint by mainly historians. As a civilizationist, I think that we need a *dynamic* approach to delineate civilizations.

Fortunately, Melko's naming the "Mainstream" has given me a suggestion to approach in a dynamic way. It is a concept of "Mainstream," not "Central" or "Major." A Mainstream may move, spread, develop, and make rivers and ponds, and it finally flows into the sea. Likewise, if a civilization moves, spreads, develops and makes ponds, we can call it a "Mainstream Civilization." In this case, the civilization will form a civilizational sphere such as the Chinese Civilizational Sphere in North-East Asia. A Mainstream Civilization must be dynamic and transfer its universal essences to other civilizations beyond time and space. In other words, it must be accepted by other civilizations beyond time and through space. In this essay I will try to provide a dynamic approach to evaluating Mainstream Civilizations.

2. The Concept of Civilization

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of civilizations. One is the ethnic or regional civilization such as Sumerian, Chinese, Mesopotamian, Indian, or Andean. The other way is to identify certain

civilizations by their cultural qualities or accomplishments, such as agricultural, religious, industrial, or economic (such as capitalist or Marxist). A culture is an element of a civilization; therefore, we can say: Japanese civilization contains all Japanese cultural elements. Therefore, the latter is included in the former and must be called “functioning cultures,” cultures that together make a civilization.

The relationship of “functioning culture” to “civilization” is always active. When a functioning culture is created in the civilization or is transferred from other civilizations and absorbed by a civilization, it may create a new civilization, rather than just change it. For example, information technology (IT) was invented in the United States at the end of the 20th century, and it worked as a functioning culture. It has changed the American civilization into an Information Society controlled by computers in every field, and even has implications within family life. IT technology was transferred from American civilization to Japan, and it has also changed Japanese civilization into an efficient information society.

At the beginnings of civilization, agriculture worked as a functioning culture and made Sumerian Civilization what it was, just as later, capitalism worked as a functioning culture and formed a contemporary Japanese civilization. The concept of civilization in this essay will be to explore “Ethnic, National, or Regional Civilization.”

3. Political System, Language, and Currency

A civilization is formed by some ethnic group with a common language, and this group usually has a political system. No civilization has been built in human history without a political system. A political system is the way that a civilization governs itself and is accordingly a functioning culture. It may create a new civilization or change the civilization within which it is introduced. Language and currency (economy) are the means used to shape a civilization, and if they change, the civilization itself changes.

Then how has a political system managed human groups to create and maintain a civilization? The political system has adopted and used language and currency, preferably, the combination of common language and a common currency. In the cases of the original civilizations (Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indus, Chinese, or Mesoamerican), their economic system was based on the growing of wheat, barley, millet, rice, or corn, which comprised accumulated wealth and were used as

currency. Therefore, we can say that all civilizations that have existed and are now existing have a political system, common language, and effective currency. We must emphasize that these three are essential tools to establish and manage a civilization. It is the political system that plays the role of an organizer, manager, and leader within the civilization, usually by governing cities, states, and empires and using the other functioning cultures as tools.

Language, especially common language in the society, works as a nerve center of the civilization. Because a common language is preferable for establishing and managing a civilization, the political force in a civilization may try to enforce it. If it cannot do so, the civilization may find itself divided among different sub-languages, as the former Soviet Union did, with the 15 civilizations with separate languages under their control. Under such a division, the civilization is like separate stones in a field, not a living entity. Only a common language can bring it to life and make it work.

Language is the most important tool for uniting many cultures in the civilization and it expresses the quality of the civilization to which the language belongs. Therefore if you want to understand a civilization, you must learn its language.

Likewise, currency expresses quantity and size of a civilization. However, a much more important role of currency is this: surplus wealth permits a division of labor system in a society and supports specialization. Specialists create cities, because cities are places where only specialists, who do not have to grow crops, dwell. Political and religious leaders, craftsmen, scholars, and artists are all specialists, and they live in cities where the currency is sufficient to support them.

New cultures are created by specialists, and usually these cultures originate in cities. Therefore, we can say that currency (surplus wealth) produces specialists, cities, cultures, and finally, civilizations. Also surplus wealth itself evolves according to the development of civilizations. Wealth and the currency that represents it has evolved from cereal, livestock, silver, and gold, to paper money, checks, promissory notes, bills of exchange, credit cards, and e-money.²

4. Two Kinds of Cultures

There are two kinds of cultures in a civilization: functioning and enriching. A functioning culture creates and forms a new type of civilization and an enriching one transforms the civilization's style. Higher

religion, philosophy or thought, creative technology, language, and the economic system usually belong to the former and the rest of the cultures belong to the latter. In the 6th century A.D., the Japanese government introduced and promoted Buddhism in Japan, thereby becoming a Buddhist country with a Buddhist culture. Then in the late 19th century, Japan learned and accepted European ideas and technology, and it has produced a modern society with industrial cultures. These are elements of the functioning cultures.

In about same period, Japanese painting (Ukiyo-e) attracted European painters and it became a part of European fine arts. In this case, however, Ukiyo-e only enriched the European arts, it did not produce any civilizational change in Europe. Likewise, Japanese Jyuhdoh (Judo) spread worldwide of late but it has only enriched the world's martial arts.

When we study civilizations, we must pay special attention to the functioning cultures since they play the more important role in the history of civilizations.

5. Transfer of Civilization and the Civilizational Sphere

Once a civilization is established, its size and success influences neighboring societies. In this case, however, there are two principles to affect its influence on others. One is that a civilization of a higher level is transferred to one of a lower level; the other is that transfer of civilization is carried on through the transferer's language and currency. In East Asia, China built a brilliant civilization and it was transferred to Korea, Japan and Vietnam with Chinese language and currency. This means those countries initially learned the Chinese language and cultural elements, and earned Chinese currency (usually silver bar or bullion) to pay the costs. (Sometimes, after the neighboring societies adopted the greater civilization's cultural elements, they reverted to their native languages and adapted them in their own way.)

The process of spreading a major civilization to its neighbors is called a civilizational sphere. In the case of East Asia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, these people formed civilizations similar to that of China. Therefore, it should be called "Chinese civilizational sphere." However, when we say "Chinese civilization was transferred," we mean that the functioning cultures were transferred.

In the case of Japan, it received from China paddy-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and Confucianism as functioning cultures. In addition to

these, Japan learned and imported the Chinese writing system, food cultures, fine arts, and some architectural technologies from China. In such a case, we can say that China built a "Mainstream Civilization" in East Asia in the age of Agricultural Society.³

6. Mainstream Civilization

A Mainstream Civilization has a strong economy and cultural power. A strong economy always has a powerful currency, and a strong culture fosters an influential language. As a result, a Mainstream Civilization acquires strong influence and power and transfers its contents to others using its language and currency. In the end, the Mainstream Civilization forms its civilizational sphere, as did the Chinese, the Indian, and today, Western civilization.

Therefore, we can say that a Mainstream Civilization must have dominant power to form its civilizational sphere. In this case, however, strong military power does not necessarily accompany it, though a Mainstream Civilization usually has strong armed forces.

But the most important characteristic of the Mainstream Civilization is that its contents are universally admired and are transferred beyond time and space.

A good example of this is Greek Civilization, which transferred its philosophy, science, and technologies to Rome, Persia, the Muslim world, and eventually to Western Europe. It also transferred its language later to Byzantine Civilization, which transferred its Christianity to Russia by way of the Greek Orthodox Church, which became the basis of Russian Civilization. This is a particularly big stream in history, whose headwaters lie in Classical Greece.

Roman Civilization, which also became a big stream, received much from Greek culture, but added much that was original, particularly Roman law. Rome accepted Christianity and transferred it with its political culture and system of law to Western Europe. It also transferred the Latin language, which became a common language later in Western Europe. Without Christianity, Latin, and Roman law, Western Europe would have become a very different civilization.

In summary, we can tell if a civilization is mainstream and universal if it has transferred its civilizational elements to others and if it has been accepted by others beyond time and space.

7. Sub-mainstream and Minor Civilizations

It is important to understand the dynamic (or changing) aspects of

a mainstream civilization by noting its influence over smaller, sub-mainstream or minor civilizations.

(1) A Sub-mainstream Civilization usually has received many civilizational elements, such as religion, thought, and technology, from other civilizations. It improves the received elements and develops its own. Those improved and developed elements are transferred to its neighbors with its language and currency but sometimes with international language and currency, which are the usual vehicles of Mainstream Civilization.

(2) A Minor Civilization is an ethnic or national group of people, that has its own political system, language, and currency, but is making efforts to build its own civilization, receiving civilizational elements from others and adapting them to its own purposes.

8. Classification of the Original Civilizations

Mainstream:

(1) Sumerian Civilization (c.3500 B.C.) created every element of civilization and its agricultural technology spread beyond time and space, and formed Mesopotamian Civilizational Sphere. Also, its religious element seems to have transferred to Judaism and later, to Islam.

(2) Indus Valley Civilization (c.2500 B.C.) seems to have received some civilizational elements from Mesopotamian but it may owe its origins to the Dravidian civilization, which preceded it. The Aryan/Dravidian conflict may have played a role in forming the caste system, an important part of its religion.

(3) Yellow River Civilization (c.1700 B.C.) developed its religious philosophy and extended it into Chinese Civilization. Finally, it has become Confucian, a system of political thought on proper governance which dated back to the earlier agriculturally-based period of Chinese civilization, which helped form other civilizations in neighbor areas.

Sub-mainstream:

(1) Egyptian Civilization (c.3400 B.C.) was as old as Sumerian and created many civilizational elements. But it did not transfer its functioning cultures, nor was it accepted by others, except for its writing system and architecture.

(2) Olmec Civilization (c.1200 B.C. Mesoamerica) extended its influence to the Mayans (c.500 B.C.) and became the base upon which all successive Mesoamerican civilizations developed, until the arrival of the Spanish.

(3) Chavin Civilization (c.900 B.C. Andean) is only now being explored, and it appears to be a base upon which all later Andean civilizations developed.

9. Classification for the Agricultural Period

Mainstream:

(1) Greek Civilization (c.700 B.C.) learned from Phoenicia the crafts of shipbuilding and seamanship; through Mediterranean trade, they built a powerful economy, under which Greek philosophy and science were developed. These philosophies and sciences were eventually transferred to Byzantine, Persian, Islamic, and much later, Western European cultures.

(2) Judaic Civilization (c.600 B.C.) was politically minor, but it created an influential religion, Judaism, which gave rise to both Christianity and Islam.

(3) Indian Civilization (c.500 B.C.) gave birth to Buddhism and this religion was transferred to neighboring countries. India also gave rise to excellent mathematics and science, which were received by Islamic countries and transferred to Europe.

(4) Chinese Civilization (c.500 B.C.) transferred Confucianism to Korea and Japan and fostered civilizations. Like India, China also produced mathematics and science, especially chemistry, and this knowledge was transferred to others. Through China, paddy-rice cultivation was spread to North Eastern Asia.

(5) Roman Civilization (c.300 B.C.) was large and lasted a long time. And the most important functioning culture it left was Christianity and Roman law. Also it left the common language, Latin, and its system of governance.

(6) Byzantine Civilization (c.500 A.D.) played an important role of a bridge between Greek, Persian, Islamic, Roman, and Slavic cultures. Through Byzantium, Greek philosophy and science were transferred to the Islamic world; also Roman and Byzantine cultures reached Slavic societies.

(7) Arabic Civilization (c.700 A.D.) created Islam and spread it across the world. Also it conveyed Greek Civilization to Europe.

(8) French Civilization (c.800 A.D.) was the first European civilization after the fall of Rome. It spread agricultural technology to other European countries. It also created the so-called "nation-state model" and modern philosophy.

Sub-mainstream:

(1) Persian Civilization (c.500 B.C., c.200 B.C., 300 A.D.) played the role of organizer of West Asia several times and became a transmitter of various cultures, as well as developing a culture of its own. It was a model for empire that influenced Rome and later the Turks. It received Islam from Arabia and transferred it to other civilizations.

(2) Turkish Civilization (c.1200 A.D.) also transferred Islam to others beyond time and space and ruled over an enormous empire (Ottoman) where it had great influence.

(3) Spanish Civilization (c. 800 A.D. and 1600 A.D.) created Europe's first and only Muslim civilization and later, as a Christian power, it sent its people, language, and religion to the New World and as far into Asia as the Philippines.

(4) British Civilization (c.1700 A.D.) sent its people and transferred its religion, language, agricultural, and industrial technology, to North America, India, Africa, and Australia.

10. Classification in the Industrial Period

Main-river (Now streams become rivers.)

(1) British Civilization (1700 A.D.) originated the Industrial Revolution, the most enormous technological change since the first agricultural civilizations. It gradually spread to European countries and America in the next century. Japan also received it in the late 19th century. The most important aspect of this civilization was that Britain provided the world with a currency that promoted the Industrial Revolution worldwide.

(2) American Civilization (c. 1800 and c. 1950 A.D.) created the first nation-state based on participatory democracy since ancient Athens. After World War II, it transferred the liberal-democracy philosophy and high technology to other civilizations with American English and THE U.S. dollar, and formed THE American Civilizational Sphere, almost worldwide. This is the largest civilizational sphere ever build by a single civilization. The language is English and the currency the U. S. dollar.

(3) Global Civilization (c.2020 A.D.) (here we indulge in speculation) will begin to form, gathering cultures worldwide within about 20 years when new currency is issued by an international organization. In this case, the language will be English but it will gradually change to Esperanto-like English in order to be acquired by all people on the

globe. This language will promote the Global Civilization worldwide. The currency will be the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDR).

Sub-mainstream :

(1) All European civilizations including French, German, and Russian will contribute to form the Global Civilization.

(2) Japanese Civilization will help to spread American Civilization in Asia and at the next stage, it will make efforts to form the Global Civilization.

Minor Civilizations: All developing countries in the world including Arabic, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. Minor civilizations are a group that has delayed entering into Industrial society. In the beginning of the 21st century, they are receiving technology and funds from Mainstream and Sub-mainstreams and are developing their own industries and cities. They will join the Global Civilization in the near future. There is a danger in the unequal development of the developed societies and those that are just beginning the process. This is playing a role in the global unrest we see today.

11. Differences between British and American Civilization

In the agricultural civilization, everything from religion, thought, and social system to life style, was bound to land and field, and personal freedom was strictly restricted in all areas. Then great desires for freedom arose and destroyed the establishments of the agricultural society. This desire for freedom has become the key concept of the Industrial society. The freest society in the age appeared in Britain in the 18th century and the Industrial society was born there as the first in human history.

The biggest change the Industrial society made, was that it produced many large cities in many places. The transition from the agricultural to the industrial society was responsible for the movement of people from the countryside to cities. This new British civilization was transferred to France several decades later and Germany delayed receiving it for about 100 years. Also it was transferred to Japan in the late 19th century. The Japanese learned it in British English and used the Pound Sterling. As an international currency, Pound Sterling played a very important role. It began to create a global economy and this was the beginning of Globalization.

However, British Civilization in those days was managed under imperialism and colonialism. When they began the industrial society, they had to find new markets for import and export. For that purpose Britain invaded minor civilizations and colonized them. Most Europeans, Americans, and Japanese followed Britain. This meant serious competition among imperialists and they fought two World Wars.

After World War II, America corrected the British faults and raised the "freedom and democracy" principle to a global ideal. In the case of Britain, freedom and democracy were domestic principles and applied only to the British Isles. But American Civilization has begun to transfer the idea of a free and democratic society to others, including Germany, Japan, and the developing nations. This means that America has become a Mainstream Civilization.

It has begun to provide the world with the U.S. dollar as an international currency and non-American people have begun to use American English as an international language. With these media, the American Civilizational Sphere has been spreading more and more widely, especially under the information technology.

The main contents of British Civilization were based on social inequality, colonialism, and an industrial technology. On the other hand, American Civilization was more egalitarian, promoted freedom and democracy worldwide, and promoted high technology. While this is an improvement over British Civilization, it too has faults.

12. Mainstream Civilization in the Future

Any predictions on the future are, of course, dangerous and open to debate. However, I suggest the following. American Civilization seems to be leading the world in the direction of globalization with the U.S. dollar and in American English. But it may be impossible for them to continue to do so, because the fundamental problem lies in the currency-supply to the world system. Each currency is supplied by its central bank according to its rules. But in the case of the present international currency, it is supplied by American huge debts. In the international economy, America promoted "free trade" according to its freedom principle and has increased its imports freely every year.

Three years ago, the American deficit in the international balance of payments was about 200 billion dollars; two years ago, it became about 300 billion dollars; and last year it reached 400 billion dollars. Through these huge deficits, the international currency is supplied to the rest of the world. What an irregular system it is! It will break down

sooner or later, perhaps within ten or so years. Then what shall we do?

The IMF (International Monetary Fund) may become a central bank and begin to issue an international currency. This would be an actual start of the Global Civilization. The United Nations will be a political system of this Global Civilization and promote the international language, which would be a modified English. But it will take many years to realize it.⁴

The biggest change in the future civilization would be a curtailing of the freedom principle because certain freedoms can destroy the natural environment. Indeed, free economy has helped develop civilizations but at the same time, overdevelopment has damaged the global environment. When the freedom-principle is denied, it will be the time for American Civilization to lose the title of Mainstream.

The expected new Mainstream Civilization would be an ecological society led by females. It will emphasize equality more than freedom. Freedom means competition and equality is less competitive. Ecological society will welcome less competition, which belongs to the female principle more than the male principle. Past and present civilizations have been dominated by males, according to the male principle, and we are now at a crucially difficult stage. Therefore, females are expected to lead the future civilization. The Mainstream Civilization in the future will be an Ecological Civilization led by women.

Notes:

1. Matthew Melko, "Mainstream Civilizations," *Comparative Civilizations Review* No. 44, p. 56, ISCSC 2001.
2. Details are discussed in Kazutake Miyahara, "The Structure of a Civilization and Some Issues," *Kindai-Bungei-sha*, Tokyo, 1998; also in ISCSC Archives 1992, 1993, 1994 and 1995.
3. *Ibid.*, pp.121-134
Also in Kazutake Miyahara, "The Transfer of Civilization – Its Principles, Mechanisms and Results," ISCSC Archive 1994.
4. Kazutake Miyahara, "The Structure of an International Civilization – a trial theory on Global Civilization," *Kobe Gaidai Ronsou* 45-1, 1994, pp. 77-101.