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Two Concepts of “Civilization”

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Civilization Has Two Definitions.

The word “civilization” has two basic meanings rather than one. There has been much discussion recently about civilizational conflicts and fusion. But to talk about such fusions, we must keep in mind that the word “civilization” has two basic meanings: first, civilization cultural type or a way of life, and second, civilization as a historico-cultural entity or a congeries of peoples sharing and practicing that particular set of values or way of life.

The differences between the two concepts are not self-evident. Yet this is so because they are often enmeshed. Their relationship is not “either/or” because there is no clear demarcation line between them. If we talk about different cultural types or ways of life, civilization in this sense means the basic values and related cultural practices, historical memories, and the geographic configurations people share with one another. Yet this kind of unity doesn’t necessarily mean political unity or a shared political stance and commitment. For instance, although historically Muslims and Westerners had certain aspects of their religions and cultures in common, politically the Islamic world and the West have always been divided and generally hostile. And both civilizations have suffered from internal warfare, as well.

Today, the European countries that comprise the European Union are trying to constitute a unified entity, striving toward a super-sovereign state, a United States of Europe, very much like America or China. But this is a massive job and predictably will take generations to accomplish. In 2007 and 2008, the draft of a European constitution was vetoed in referenda in Holland and France, referenda attempting to affirm a common constitution. Even though the European Union is expected to emerge eventually as something like a super-sovereign state, there is still a long way to go before the European states can finally attain the goal of political unification and become a sort of “United States of Europe.”

Civilization in the sense of cultural type is defined by a common mode of thinking or system of beliefs. Usually it includes not only a particular set of beliefs but also various cultural practices, despite populations speaking various languages or dialects. In most cases, civilization in this sense also shares a common geographic space, with Islam, perhaps, as an exception (as it is scattered over huge expanses of land on two continents). This lack of geographic continuity may be one factor in Islam’s failure to modernize, along with the other cultural factors discussed in “Modernization or Westernization: the Muslim World vs. the Rest,” authored by Laina Farhat-Holzman in this issue.

There are many East and West African countries that have adopted Islam in one way or another. There are North African countries that are mainly Islamic. There are some Islamic countries in Southeast Asia, too. There are many ethnic groups who believe in Islam in China. So it seems that Islam is a very much a scattered religious, social, and political phenomenon that does not have very clear boundaries.

It has to be noted, too, that civilization in the sense of cultural type is a long-term dynamic structure. It is a particular spatio-temporal continuum that has existed for thousands of years.

Diffusion of Cultures

Almost without exception, civilization in the sense of cultural type or way of life can be separated from that of a particular historico-cultural entity or aggregate of peoples who share a common way of life and a common geographic locus. Because these two aspects of it can be discussed separately, the values of a particular congeries of peoples called “a civilization” can diffuse among other peoples in the world. Chinese civilization, for example, was centered on “Zhong yuan” or Northern China. Soon it spread to other parts of China. After the Qin unified China, it even expanded to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Yet this kind of expansion was not accompanied by a massive immigration of the Han Chinese bringing with them their particular way of life. It was mainly the Vietnamese, Koreans, and Japanese who took the initiative in adopting the Chinese values and cultures.

It is obvious that the culture of a civilization is not like intellectual property rights, in the legal sense. If the idea of intellectual property rights was pursued to the limit, the Japanese and Koreans would have to pay huge amounts of patent fees to China, for they adopted Chinese culture almost wholesale. Similarly, China would have to pay a great deal to the West because in the past 170 years or so, it has borrowed massively from the West. Yet before the 16th century, the West adopted crucial technologies -- Arabic numerals, gun powder, paper, and the compass -- from the East. So, there is a “civilizational debt” on the part of the West, too. But this is already history, vague history to many, and intermediate peoples or cultures between the East and West also propagated these technologies. Inventions of a civilization are very different from the idea of an intellectual property right --- they can diffuse easily.

If the cultural practice of a civilization has inherent values in it, in one way or another and sooner or later it will diffuse to other peoples, to be adopted by them, to be made use of and improved upon by them. But in many cases this kind of cultural dissemination is not wholesale or unselective adoption. Rather it’s highly selective. In this connection, Japan is a good case in point. Some aspects of Chinese civilization were adopted by Japanese in a selective manner, as they preferred certain aspects of Chinese culture and rejected others. Here attention should be paid to the fact that in contrast, the

Koreans and Vietnamese in ancient times imported Chinese culture in a much more “faithful” or “authentic” manner than did the Japanese.

Often, the diffusion of the values and cultural practices of a civilization is a result of conquest by people who originally “invented” them. Often, the conquest was followed by oppression, exploitation and even enslavement. In Western antiquity, during the Hellenistic period, the Greeks conquered huge expanses of land in West Asia and North Africa. They brought with them Greek culture, but not the equality that Greeks had among themselves. They were the conquerors, and the local peoples were the conquered, a relationship between the ruler and the ruled. However, sometimes culture is not totally in the hands of the conquerors. Sometimes, conquerors became the ones who were culturally conquered in the end. In a matter of decades, the conquerors would be submerged in the formerly conquered civilization.

When conquerors bring a culture to a region that already has an advanced civilization, one that is more sophisticated than that of the conquerors, the conquered culture can swamp the invaders. This may have been the case with the Greeks [see Walbank, 1992]. Because the conquered Eastern nations had their own dynamic cultures, cultures as old as Egypt and Syria, and because these cultures had influenced the Greeks for 2000 years, the cultural changes were Greek, not Egyptian and Syrian.

A comparable case is that of the nomads in northern China, who invaded and conquered Han Chinese from time to time. Just as these conquering nomads were culturally conquered by the Han Chinese, the Greeks were eventually converted to the values and cultures that had been evolving in Egyptian and Syriac societies for centuries.

In the end, the Greeks and Romans adopted a new religion, Christianity, which in its ethos is an Oriental religion. So at least it can be fairly safely said that a few centuries after the Greeks invaded West Asia and North Africa, bringing their ingenious culture there with them, a kind of cultural fusion occurred there, one in which it was Eastern rather than Greco-Roman religions that played the protagonist. The Greeks and Romans as conquerors became the conquered in the end.

Integration as a Way of Civilizational Growth

If civilization in the sense of cultural type is usually made of various constituent elements, it then follows that when one civilization encounters another, their respective components may collide and fuse. Both may then undergo substantial changes and a new round of civilizational fusion or hybridization may occur.

Sometimes this takes a long time, perhaps two or three hundred years, or even longer. Today, civilizational hybridization is happening everywhere. This current process of hybridization is of global dimensions and is taking place very fast. Only a decade ago,

the average person in the West did not know much about China, a situation that has markedly changed today.

In mainstream newspapers and magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *the Economist* and *The New York Times*, there is news about China almost every day. Thus it is not odd at all for New Yorkers to celebrate the Chinese Spring Festivals, very much like the Chinese celebrating Christmas nowadays. In this process of civilizational integration, elements of a heterogeneous civilization might be absorbed into another. So in the future, there will probably emerge a new culture or even a new global civilization, of a highly mixed nature.

Buddhism as a Cultural Transplant.

The importation of Buddhism into China is not only the adoption by the Chinese of an Indian religion, but also the appropriation of cultural elements from India [Ruan, 2011]. Actually, the ancient Indian civilization had only one way of influencing other parts of East Asia and that was through Buddhism. Thus, if we examine Buddhist doctrines in Chinese, we will come across things that are not exclusively Buddhist but are the legends, fables, mythologies, or customs of ancient India as a whole.

With Buddhism integrated into China, much Indian culture was incorporated into Chinese civilization. Buddhist stories and some important concepts, such as *dharma*, *atman* and *moksha*, are not confined to Buddhism as a distinct religion, but are found in other Indian religions or in Indian civilization as a whole. Other Indian religions or philosophies such as Brahmanism, Lokayata, Ajivakism and Jainism, shared very much the same legends, fables, mythologies or customs as Buddhism [Warder, 1980].

Even if these religions or philosophies were not introduced into China and had never been known to the Chinese, they nevertheless shared these same aspects with Buddhism. Also, concepts or stories of other Indian religions, such as Jainism, might have passed for Buddhist doctrines. Therefore, the importation of Buddhism meant the appropriation not only of a religion but of important aspects of an entire civilization.

After Buddhism was transplanted to China, it would sooner or later become Sinicized. It might take a long time, say, a few hundred to even a thousand years, for it to be completely Sinicized, or to evolve into a sort of Chinese Buddhism, such as Zen.³ There is no doubt that Zen is a kind of Sinicized Buddhism. Apart from “Zen,” there were quite a few other Buddhist denominations. They are all Sinicized Buddhisms. They can all be regarded very much as a transformation from the “original” Indian Buddhism. They are all sophisticated forms of religion, yet all underwent important metamorphosis

³ Why is it “Zen” rather than the proper Chinese pronunciation of “Chan”? Because in Japanese it is pronounced as “Zen” and the Westerners transliterated it from Japanese. Therefore nowadays when Westerners mention “Chan Zong”, they use the name “Zen Buddhism”.

and maturation in China, which took a long time, at least seven or eight hundred years after Buddhism was first introduced into China.

Christianity as a Cultural Transplant

When we talk about Christianity, we are actually talking about civilizational encounter, engagement, and eventual integration. Christianity is an offspring of three parent civilizations: Greco-Roman; Jewish, and Syriac. Thus it can be said that Christianity is a typical hybrid religion, incorporating religious and cultural elements evolving in West Asian and the Mediterranean, a region seen by Toynbee as a civilizational “cauldron” or a locus of religious “syncretism” [Toynbee, 1947, Vol. I, Pages 473-82]. This syncretism embraced more civilizational encounters, engagements, conflicts, and integration than anywhere else in the world, even more than had happened in the history of China.

In this connection, it can be said that a civilization that has survived the vagaries of history and is still alive today is invariably a hybrid. It is a super mixture of heterogeneous components and wholesale civilizations or religions. There is no such a thing as a “pure” civilization. There are no “pure” Han Chinese either; this is an invention. In actual fact, the Han are a mixture of races and ethnic groups.

They are a super mixture because for thousands of years, different peoples or ethnic groups moved to where China now to find their “lebensraum,” only to engage and mingle with one another (Yi, 2012). Perhaps we can talk about “pure” Japanese, since they are much more homogeneous racially, but even there, not altogether.

But genetically, the Chinese are much more heterogeneous than previously thought. That is a very big difference. Occasionally we can see in the streets of China a man or woman who looks Western, with a big nose and deep eye sockets, but their manners, facial expressions, body gestures and the way they speak are completely Chinese. In fact there is genetic connection, though remote, between ethnic Han Chinese on the one hand and Westerners or Africans on the other. (For this there is anthropological and archaeological evidence, as Professor Li Ji’s research shows [Li 2005: Pages 352-53]. In most cases we cannot tell what happened exactly, even five generations ago. China is such a place where numerous tribes or peoples came, settled down, and mingled, and eventually there emerged the Han Chinese, who are just a mixture of races.

A Civilization Should Be Open and Inclusive.

It should always be in a process of becoming, for it is never a finished product. If a civilization is dynamic, it is forever changing and always open-minded. Therefore we are in no position to say that it is in its final configuration. Also, a civilization can rise and fall and can even disappear completely in history. But if it is dynamic, it must be evolving rather than stagnant, diversified rather than homogeneous, inclusive rather

exclusive, and open-minded rather than close-minded. As it is extremely important for one civilization to maintain its identity when encountering another or when interacting with another, it should try to maintain its essential characteristics, while at the same time creatively remaking itself. That is to say, a healthy society must always be one which tries vigorously to preserve its integrity or essence, but at the same time forever opens itself to absorb new nutrients and advance with time. It should be a historico-cultural entity that makes progress everyday and innovates everyday.

Certain ethnic groups can be seen as the original “inventor” of a civilization. Here we may bring in the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians. There are also civilizations in the way of historico-cultural entities that may not be seen as “original.” Nevertheless, they could be good at appropriating other peoples’ cultures. For instance, the Germans at the beginning of the Middle Ages adopted Christianity from the Mediterranean peoples; Arabs, Islam; Russians, Eastern Orthodox Christianity; Japanese, Chinese cultures and religions [Ruan, 2006]. Although these peoples also have their own cultures or civilizations today, in a strict sense, none of them are “inventors” of civilizations. They just borrowed their civilizations from somewhere else. Yet, when the Japanese imported Chinese culture, they were being very selective. More importantly, they had their own innovations.

Apart from borrowing the Chinese versions of Confucianism and Buddhism, there were also indigenous Japanese elements, such as Shinto. It is certain that all these peoples inherited cultures and religions that had been evolving somewhere else for centuries. Western, Islamic, and Russian civilizations historically all had these three common parental civilizations: Syriac, Jewish, and Greco-Roman societies.

However, Syriac and Greco-Roman civilizations were not really “original” civilizations either, for they also had their own cultural parents. Before Syriac and Greco-Roman societies, there were Egyptian, Sumerian, Cretan, Babylonian and Hittite civilizations. So, even Syriac and Greco-Roman civilizations were late comers in history and had other cultures as their predecessors. They came late and picked up the technologies, arts, literatures and religions already there. With these they developed their own cultural identities, gradually.

Here, again Japan has to be mentioned. It can be said that the parent of Japanese civilization is China. Due to military and political pressures, Japanese systematically imported Chinese culture, beginning from the 7th century or the early Tang onward. Having been transplanted, Chinese culture profoundly changed the structure of Japanese society and greatly increased its productivity, thus raising its civilizational level considerably. Thus, it is legitimate to talk about parent and child civilizations, Japanese civilization being the offspring of its Chinese parent. Before the Japanese imported Chinese culture, China had been evolving on the continent for roughly 2000 years, if Xia is taken as the beginning of Chinese civilization.

The Unity of the Two Concepts

Though civilization as an aggregate of peoples differs from civilization as a way of life, the two concepts are related. Civilization as a way of life should always provide the basis for identity, or a sense of belonging, to those who practice its values. So the relationship between the two is very much like the two sides of a coin; without the one, the other cannot be. As a historico-cultural entity with various peoples and ethnic groups sharing a common locus and a common set of values, a civilization can structurally appropriate the components of another while retaining its own identity. It can even absorb the elements of several other civilizations while still retaining its identity or essential cultural traits.

India as a Modern Example

In 1947, when the modern Indian state was founded, India had already contained three major civilizations: Hindu, Islamic, and Western. Now, there are at least 130 to 150 million Muslims in India (the Muslim population of Pakistan is not much larger than that of India and before 1947 Pakistan was part of India) and a substantial number of Christians. Although India has absorbed so many heterogeneous elements, it still keeps its own civilizational integrity. It is still unmistakably India. Even the physical appearance of an Indian or the physical aspect of geographical India immediately reveals that the person is unmistakably Indian and India is unmistakably India.

Yet there are circumstances in which, despite a common religion, the results can be seen as different civilizations. We may differentiate European, Latin American, and North American civilizations to illustrate the point. Some consider them three different civilizations, but others think them offspring of one Western civilization. But some see Western civilization as distinct from Eastern Orthodox civilization, although both have Christian origins [Bagby, 1963; Braudel, 1994].

Russia demonstrates the point. Russian civilization is certainly of the Eastern Orthodox type. To a great extent, it can be seen as a close cultural relative of Western Christian civilization, but for geo-political, ethnic and various historico-cultural reasons, Eastern Orthodox and Western Christian societies have been often hostile rivals. Similarly, modern China and Japan share Sinic cultures in common, but very often for geo-political, ethnic, and various historico-cultural reasons, they are not regarded as one cultural entity. In many cases they are seen as two distinct and even rival civilizations.

To make things even more complicated, Western- and Russian-type Christianities, Judaism, Islam, and even the Monophysites in Armenia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Nestorian Christians, all share the same Syriac and Greco-Roman roots. All these religions can be seen as belonging to one super Syriac civilization [Bagby, 1963], despite the fact that all of them inherited a great deal from Greco-Roman society, i.e., its philosophical ideas, material infrastructures, and political institutions. Although they are culturally or religiously bound to one another, for geographical, ethnic and historico-cultural reasons,

these religions have been seen as distinct historical entities or different “civilizations” by such thinkers as Toynbee and Huntington.

A Civilization Should Always Evolve and Grow

A civilization should also be something that is always evolving and growing. It is forever a stream of dynamism incessantly flowing, rather than stagnant. If the concept of cultural type is legitimate, so must be the concept of historico-cultural entity. In this connection, China, America, India, Europe, and even Russia can all be seen as gigantic historico-cultural entities. Yet at an initial stage, they were all only a cluster of scattered tribes, but they shared linguistic roots. We see this in the Sino-Tibetan language family, which includes a multitude of Chinese, Tibetan, Thai and Burmese tongues. We also see the Indo-European language family, which includes Germanic, Slavonic, even Indo-Iranian languages. Historically, ethnic groups in a certain area might have conflicts with one another, but they might cooperate with each other, too, or engage with other human groups peacefully. They may even incorporate one another. Eventually they were integrated into larger and larger entities.

We know historically that a powerful early state incorporated less powerful groups one after another, and at last there was that giant thing: “civilization” [Ruan, 2006]. Having passed the initial stage of birth, a civilization may evolve further and grow into an empire, such as Persian, Greco-Roman, and Qin-Han empires. We may talk about the Arab Caliphate. We can even talk about the Mongolian empire under Genghis Khan or Kublai Khan. Civilization in the sense of empire can embrace many dynasties, one dynasty succeeding or replacing another. We may take Egyptian civilization before the Persian and Greek invasions. Egypt had been evolving along the Nile for 3000 years. During this time, there had been successive dynasties, more dynasties even than in Chinese history. And, there had been many dynasties in Chinese civilization before 1911. Compared with other dynasties in history, these were massive in terms of territory and population.

Some civilizations, for example, that of the Persians and Mongolians, did not outlast their imperial periods. The Persians did enjoy 1,000 years of imperial prominence, but after the Islamic conquest, it never recovered.

Civilizational State Versus Nation State

Some civilizations are made of a congeries of peoples or ethnic groups sharing a common geographic locus and a common set of values. A civilization in this sense is also a combination of shared history, shared culture, and shared socio-political institutions. Europe, China and India are all like that. A civilization in this sense could be something which not only includes a variety of peoples or ethnic groups but also vast spaces. Such a civilization can even appear to be a nation state, like modern China and modern India. India and China each can be called a "civilizational state" [Jacques, 2010].

A civilizational state is a political configuration similar to a nation state. Like a nation state, it has its sovereignty, but it is at the same time a massive aggregate of nations or ethnic groups which a nation state is simply not. Europe has many nation states. Although Europe is not as huge as China in geographic and demographic terms, it comprises many nation states. In contrast, China and India have many peoples and ethnic groups yet present themselves as sovereign entities, very much like a nation state of Europe. Indeed, China as a civilization does appear to be a nation state. Civilization in the sense of a congeries of peoples and a super hybrid of cultures and religions can be a colossal political, economic, and cultural totality that includes a variety of ethnic groups, languages and vernacular cultures, yet it may also pass for a nation state.

The Chinese "Diaspora"

Civilization in the sense of a demographic entity can also include a group of people who present themselves as diaspora, a population with no territorial or political sovereignty. The Jewish diaspora was like that. They were a guest people everywhere. Historically they were treated badly by host nations, especially in economically bad times and during crises. That was the situation for the Jews in Europe. To a lesser extent, that is the situation in which overseas Chinese have found themselves in Southeast Asia, too. Here, attention should also be drawn to the Indian Diaspora in East Africa. Historically, especially when times were bad, the Indians, Chinese, and Jews as guest peoples were persecuted by host nations, sometimes expelled, and occasionally massacred.

Take the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Economically, the Chinese are a dominant people in that region. In the Philippines, the Chinese today make up roughly 1.5 % of the total population, but perhaps about 90% of the Filipino economy is in the hand of the Chinese. The Filipinos have generally been tolerant toward their Chinese population. But in 1997 and 1998, during the economic crisis of Southeast Asia, overseas Chinese were persecuted in Indonesia. Chinese shops were looted or burned. Nevertheless, the problem was addressed soon so that the Chinese have lived in relative peace ever since. As the Chinese are an economically dominant group there, it can be assumed that the politically dominant Malays in Indonesia will continue to be a basically tolerant people. Yet in Indonesia, 4 % of the entire population is Chinese, roughly 8 million [see, for example, Baidu Baike: "The Chinese population in Indonesia"].

In Malaysia, ethnic Chinese make up about 24 % of the entire population [Baidu: “Malaysian Chinese”]. Overseas Chinese there tend to be economically powerful, although there are also laborers and petty shopkeepers. Only a small proportion of them are really wealthy. Demographically, overseas Chinese have made significant contributions to Southeast Asia. They have played a crucial role in the nation building of Southeast Asian countries. In fact they have been living there in substantial numbers ever since the 16th century, although often on a razor’s edge.

While in terms of nationality, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are not Chinese any more, culturally they still are. They speak Chinese, write Chinese and practice Chinese culture. They celebrate Chinese festivals. Above all, they have traditional Chinese values. Thus, Chinese and local peoples and cultures need to incorporate into one mixed culture and one mixed race. Thailand has done an excellent job of incorporating their Chinese. Thai Chinese no longer have Chinese names, which the Thais consider a benefit to integration. Indonesia has done this as well. So far, Malaysia, Burma, and Vietnam have not.

The Enhancing Power of Civilization

One last point: An advanced civilization can play a key role in enhancing a relatively backward culture by dramatically raising its social development level. Ready examples are the Russians adopting Eastern Orthodox religion and the Japanese adopting Chinese culture. Before that, Russians and Japanese were just tribal alliances still at the stage of the early state. Yet after that they picked up momentum and began to develop rapidly.

The Arabs are an even better case. They had been a distinct backwater living in the Arabian Peninsula for centuries before Islam emerged. They had played only an insignificant role in shaping the Roman or Syriac societies [Ruan, 2006]. They had been a nomadic people at the periphery of civilization in West Asia. But after adopting Islam, they suddenly assumed control at the center stage of history. Soon they would encompass immense areas of the inhabited world: the entire Middle East, part of West Europe, part of East and West Africa, Central Asia, northwest China and a large part of India. Finally, in the 14th century, Islam arrived where Malaysia and Indonesia are now. So, it can safely be asserted that an advanced civilization can often radically enhance a relatively backward people.

But here, again, is a perfect case of how the concepts of civilization (a) as a way of life and (b) as a demographic entity sharing a certain way of life can be viewed as distinct from one another and treated separately.

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