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Hanwen Fang, *A Study of Comparative Civilizations*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014.

Reviewed by Shi Yuanhui

In 2014, Professor Fang Hanwen of Soochow University, China, published his 5-volumed monograph, *A Study of Comparative Civilizations*, offering his understanding of the main civilizations in the world. Professor Fang won his doctorate in Beijing Normal University in 1990, and he continued his studies of comparative literature and comparative civilizations, having published 34 books. As he wrote in the epilogue, he had been working on the book, *A Study of Comparative Civilizations*, since he was still reading for his doctor's degree and finally completed it when he was invited to be a full-time research fellow in Peking University. (p. 414-15, Vol. 5)

The first volume of the book consists of an introduction and discusses the origin and systems of civilizations. Volume 2, Volume 3, and Volume 4 describe the major civilizations in the world in terms of historical growth, political factors such as nations, states and powers, as well as religion and spiritual belief. In the last volume, Professor Fang makes a comparative study of western and eastern civilizations, and gives his own judgment about the future of the world.

In the book, Professor Fang divides the world into 8 systems of civilization: Asian Pacific System, South Asian System, Mediterranean Atlantic System, Mid-Eastern Arabic System, North American & Australian System, Latin American System, African System, and Jewish System.

Contrary to Max Weber's judgment that Confucianism preaches getting accustomed to the world rationally, Professor Fang affirms the value of traditional Confucianism, which, Professor Fang believes, advocates the active transformation of the world. Professor Fang accepts the idea of Guo Moruo about the origin of Confucianists, who Guo believes derived their belief from the change of spiritual human belief from primitive worship of oracles and witches to humanism. (p. 128-29, Vol. 4) In this sense, Confucianism is actually focused on how to improve human life, and thus make a more habitable world and a more peaceful and friendly human community. Fang states his disagreement with Weber in the viewpoint of the latter, pointing out that firstly Weber shouldn't have drawn analogy between Christian priests and Confucianists; secondly Weber neglected the demand of Confucius and Mencius that true man should make efforts to implement the principle of *tian dao* ("Way of Heaven") to establish a Chinese Garden of Eden for people, and thirdly Confucianism is not a religion as Weber argued. (p. 10-17, Vol. 4.) In fact, in *The Analects* one of Confucius' disciples once said, "The true man has to be strong-minded and persevering, for he is taking a very formidable mission with an endless journey ahead" and in the same book Confucius was once frowned on by a common gatekeeper for he believed the sage was "one who knows that what he pursues is impossible and yet persists anyway." (14.38).

Zhang Zai, a Confucianist in Northern-Song Dynasty, tasked the intellectuals to “Find the central principle of the natural world, defend the normal life of the people, learn and pass down the doctrines of the past sages, and establish eternal peace for thousands of generations.” The strong sense of responsibility to make a more humane world is self-evident in Confucianists.

Of course, Fang doesn't deny some defects of traditional Confucianism. He points out that the golden mean of Confucianism, preaching being open-minded and tolerant, is at the same time liable to suffocate deep and metaphysical recognition and understanding of things, especially paying little attention to science and technology and often making compromise between truth and fallacy, for the traditional idea emphasized that people should be moderate and always ready to achieve a comprehensive balance between various things, thus making the world more harmonious, instead of pursuing some particular and detailed knowledge by being interested in only one thing, or several things. (p. 137-140, Vol. 4)

In this sense, Fang believes that Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism which exerted profound influence over Chinese psychology for about 800 years, as a moral philosophy, could make a complement to western rationalism. He wrote in the book, “Chinese Confucianism, as a humanism doctrine, will make a better spiritual support for the human future than monotheisms. This is an advantage in Chinese civilization, although this doesn't mean Confucianism is the best. But it is undoubtedly a far-reaching social ideal, and of course, western science and technology will still certainly function as a motivation in social history.” (p. 410, Vol. 5.) Here Confucianism, as Professor Fang said, could provide the human future with spiritual or psychological reassurance and guidance which western rationalism would most probably fail to offer. But it shouldn't be denied that western rationalism, although problematic in some ways, would still be the backbone and driving force to human history, especially western science and technology. In this sense, Confucianism would function as a complement to western rationalism, for the latter seems to be focused too much on some profoundly mechanical, instrumental and logical methods of thought, while the sense of compromise, tolerance of ideological differences, and mutual care and help in Confucianism would bring to human world, especially different civilizations, some means of getting united peacefully and staying as different ones at the same time, softening largely or even diminishing the excessive rigidity of western rationalism.

In the book, Professor Fang points out that the deep root of western-centricism of rationality can be found in Hegel's doctrine. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel once declared that rationality should be the only factor in whose yardstick history could be measured in terms of philosophy and that world history was actually a course of rationalization, for rationality was the arbitrator of the world. Hegel was obviously preaching western rationality and at the same time rejecting eastern mode of thought, thus exhibiting a western-centricism of rationality. In his *Lesser Logic*, Hegel often mentioned the two conceptions of identity and disparity and declared the two co-existed side by side, but he believed at the same time that absolute rationality could bring itself to reality, making

idea identical with existence. In this sense, Hegel highlighted identity more than disparity. (p. 377-78, Vol. 5)

In 1993, Huntington published his article “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs*, arguing that after the collapse of the Soviet Russia, Islam would be the foremost challenge to western civilization. That article was expanded in 1996 into a book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington believed that the world, after the Cold War, would have to face the cultural clashes instead of the ideological ones, and conflicts between major civilizations would be most likely to occur for the cultural tensions were irreconcilable. The September 11th Attack in 2001 and some other Islamic terrorism incidents seem to be some confirmations of Huntington’s understanding of civilizations. But in fact, Huntington’s conception is a new version of Hegel’s emphasis of identity, only preaching the predominating position of western civilization, neglecting the mutual cultural understanding and tolerance and thus being very dangerous to the peace of the world. After all, those Islamic terrorists shouldn’t be considered as true representatives of all Muslims, and what’s more, the imposition of western values and the frequent military interference are the direct causes of the terrorism. In cultural communications, it is undeniable that each person has his or her own judgment whether some certain cultural values are acceptable or not, and that those universal ideas such as democracy, freedom, equality and human rights established in Enlightenment have their own life and would sooner or later bloom in the world. That is to say, we should be pretty self-confident that with the gradual cultural communications, those truly universal western values would be finally accepted by the world, while their rude imposition through violent interventions would only lead to disorder and trouble, even though these actions are justified regarding their purpose. Besides, it should be mentioned that even though those universal ideas have been accepted by the whole world, cultural differences will still exist, because identity and disparity coexist side by side. In this sense, the west ought to be patient and respectful to cultural differences.

Fukuyama’s end of history is another version of Hegel’s highlighting of identity, because Fukuyama believed that western democracy would be the last and eternal social system, or the world politics would be westernized with the end of Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Russia. In this sense, the conception of end of history also preaches the predominating role of western political system in the whole world, believing the western political system would be sufficiently applicable to the whole world and ignoring the fact that different civilizations would absorb western political conceptions with their various choice based on their various national tradition and culture. What’s more unacceptable is that Fukuyama believes that since individuals have achieved their “equality” and needs, they would lose the desire to be superior to others and then the history of human race would be static without the motivation of individuals. About this point, Professor Fang points out that Fukuyama has put his studies of human history on the foundation of individual psychology, that he has misunderstood Hegel’s relationship between master and slave, and that his doctrine has

something to do with Reich's idea that human psychology was determined by social politics. (p. 344-49, Vol. 5.)

In his book, Professor Fang writes about his own understanding of the human future. First, he argues against theological and secular conceptions of Utopia, declaring that they, although pursuing progress, are actually denying continual historical progress by saying that Utopia is the final and perfect social state. Secondly, he talks about Fukuyama's end of history. Finally, he rejects any prophecy that the human world will end in doom. He believes that the human world will persevere in spite of many problems and that in the future western rationality will be eventually replaced by a New Dialectical Rationality that would grow out of the long communication between western rationality and Chinese rationality as articulated in the ideas of *The Book of Changes* and *Mohist Canon*. Of course, although he expresses his deep concerns about social problems provoked by the unlimited overuse of rationality, especially instrumental rationality, Professor Fang doesn't deny the true value of western rationality, which he believes has brought about such progress in the world and will still function as the motivation of human history. (p. 336-410, Vol. 5.)

As is mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Professor Fang has been working on this book for more than 20 years, and he has put his own insightful understanding of world civilizations in the book. But will his ideas be accepted by readers? We have to wait and see.