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## *The Comparative Study of Civilizations and its Relation to China*

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Chinese scholars have recently expressed much interest in the comparative study of civilizations, lately carried on mostly in the West, but long open to, and increasingly of interest to, diverse perspectives. This essay is intended to suggest a road toward the development of comparative-civilizational studies centered on some questions of both historical and contemporary significance, with particular attention to one question concerning which the initial presuppositions of Western and Chinese scholars, in particular, may be at variance, but where there may be room for the development of agreed empirical-theoretical conclusions.

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975), the leading civilizationist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the founders of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC), developed a theory of human history and applied it to the comparative study of civilizations, which he defined as an intellectual enterprise.

A major theme in Toynbee's work was comparison between the West and China.

Toynbee's key work was *A Study of History*, published over a generation, from 1934 to 1954, revised in 1961, and finally revised in 1972.

As stated in the Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition (s.v. "Arnold Toynbee"), Toynbee "...examined the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history, and ... concluded that they rose by responding successfully to challenges under the leadership of creative minorities composed of elite leaders" and fell when their leaders, intoxicated by their successes, failed to create new responses to the new challenges which inevitably arose in consequence of their very successes.

Toynbee first studied what he labeled the "Hellenic" civilization of classical Greece and Rome, and then what he styled the "Western" civilization of Europe. But after these he gave special attention to what he first labeled the "Sinic" civilization of ancient China and the successor "Far Eastern" civilization of medieval and modern China. (These two he later came to see as better understood as two phases of a single "Sinic" civilization.)

Toynbee's civilizational theory was developed in three phases, each embodied in book publication. I discuss these phases below. Here I cite only his final conclusions, from the 1972 edition of *A Study of History*.

“The Hellenic Civilization provides the evidence for a model of continuous development... Chinese history, by contrast, is marked by a pattern of alternating cycles of unity and disunity, order and disorder, progress and decline... The historian’s task is to combine the significant features of these Hellenic and Chinese patterns, creating a realistic model that can be applied to the history of other civilizations” (23).

The Hellenic model defines the transition from local states to a universal state; the Chinese model defines the alternating rhythms of a universal state’s successive lapses and rallies (69). Toynbee’s composite Helleno-Sinic model (64) encompasses both.

In the 1972 edition, Toynbee provided a list of 34 “civilizations of the world, 3500 BC to AD 2000, illustrating the successive phases of their growth.” The “phases” were either “phases of political plurality” or a “universal state phase.” To cite only the best known: Western civilization was always politically plural, and therefore conformed to the Hellenic model; Sinic and Indic civilizations began plural (Hellenic model) but entered a universal state phase and remained there; Egyptian and Orthodox Christian civilizations were in a universal state phase throughout; and Islamic civilization began in a universal state phase but entered and remained in a plural phase.

There is plenty of food for thought here; I’ll narrow the menu somewhat, to a central item, stated as a question. Is Toynbee correct in contending that, until the era of Qin Shi Huang, the history of Sinic civilization is better understood by applying the Hellenic model than the Sinic model?

Toynbee’s argument that this is so can be found in Chapter 7 of the 1972 edition, “Hellenic and Chinese models,” pp. 55-64, and in more detail in Chapters VI 3-5, of the 1961 volume *Reconsiderations*, pp. 170-209.

And if Toynbee is correct in contending that Chinese history underwent a change of model, or of “stable state,” what accounts for the “change of model,” from the Hellenic to the Sinic, from the norm of plurality to the norm of unity, in Chinese history? And what accounts for the apparent durability of that Sinic model’s pattern of normal-unity in Chinese history since the Qin?

Bibliographic references to Toynbee’s argument are provided below.

I hope that the next ISCS meeting that may occur in a Chinese venue will inspire some scholars, Western, Chinese, or other, to pursue this inquiry — and then to ask, as a followup: Which model holds more promise for the future of our current global civilization — the Hellenic norm of plurality, or the Sinic norm of unity?

## Bibliographic References: The Three Stages of Toynbee's Theory Development

1. The first stage comprises the first ten volumes of *A Study of History*, about 7000 pages in all, published from 1934 to 1954.

Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History*. London: Oxford University Press, 1954-1961. 12 v. illus.

A two-volume abridgement by D.C. Somervell, in more than 1000 pages, was published 1946-1957.

Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History*. abridgement by D.C. Somervell. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987-, c1946.

Somervell's abridgement was translated into Chinese by Guo Xiaoling and published in Shanghai in 2010, as two volumes of 955 pages.

Li shi yan jiu / Anuode Tangyinbi zhu; Samowei'er bian; Guo Xiaoling ... [et al.] yi.

历史研究 / 阿诺德·汤因比著; 萨默维尔编; 郭小凌 ... [et al.]译. Di 1 ban. 第1版. Shanghai: Shanghai ren min chu ban she, 2010. 上海: 上海人民出版社, 2010. 2 v. (955 p.); 23 cm.

2. The second stage presented Toynbee's revisions of his theory, made in response to more than 100 reviews of his work by critics. This was published in 1961 as a 740-page volume titled *Reconsiderations*, as Volume XII of *A Study of History*.
3. The third stage was embodied in a single volume: a new edition, revised and abridged by the author and Jane Caplan of *A Study of History*. Unlike its predecessors, this volume was heavily illustrated and designed for a more general readership, though still amounting to 576 pages.

Toynbee, Arnold J. *A Study of History*. New ed., rev. and abridged by the author and Jane Caplan. New York: Weathervane Books: distributed by Crown Publishers, c1972. 576 p. ill., maps; 30 cm.

### See also:

Arnold J. Toynbee

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold\\_J.\\_Toynbee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_J._Toynbee)

*A Study of History*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Study\\_of\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Study_of_History)