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Chinese President Xi Jinping first proposed the Global Civilization Initiative a few days ago. He pointed out: “Together we should advocate the importance of inheriting civilization and innovating with it, completely bring out the value of each country’s history and culture for our times, and promote the creative transformation and innovative development of the excellent traditional culture of each country as it modernizes.” This will be very important for us in understanding anew the value of Eastern and Western civilizations.

For a long time, both the study of Chinese history and the study of European history have been done on a country-by-country basis. In fact, the development and change of various civilizations, even individual countries, are due not only to internal factors but also to exchanges and interactions with other civilizations.

Liang Qichao once said that the study of Chinese history can be divided into three stages: “The China of China,” “The China of Asia,” and “The China of the World.”

The eminent historian Mr. Lei Haizong once pointed out that the study of world history should pay attention to the connection and mutual influence between China and other parts of the world, and to China’s contribution to the development of human civilization in the world. All of the current academic research on the history of cultural exchanges along the Silk Road and between China and the West during the Ming and Qing dynasties shows that we need to redefine the relationship between Chinese and

Western cultures and re-explore the contemporary significance of Confucian culture from the perspective of the history of world civilizations.

Rethinking the East-West Cultural Relationship from a Long-term Global History Perspective

Why was Europe ahead of other regions in the nineteenth century? What are the reasons for the rise of the West? For a long time, “Eurocentrists” believed that it was due to Greek civilization or Christian belief, while countries outside Europe did not have that kind of cultural genetic makeup—China, for instance, had Confucianism and Taoism—so the only hope for backward regions and countries was for them to accept Greek civilization.

But is this real history? No. The “Eurocentrists” will often say that Greece is the root of Western culture. But in fact, Greek culture in its formation was mainly influenced by Eastern cultures, such as Egyptian culture and Assyrian culture. Herodotus, the father of Greek history, was a Persian who later settled in Greece. He believed that Greek commemorative ceremonies and customs had all come from Egypt.

The Greeks learned divination techniques from Egypt, and that “many things learned in Egypt were brought to Greece virtually unchanged . . . almost all of the names of the gods in Greece had come from Egypt.” Why were Greece and Egypt so close? Because Greece was once a colony of Egypt. There is sufficient historical basis for this. In Greek tragedies, a large number of remnants of ancient Near Eastern languages such as Egyptian and ancient Syriac can still be found.

Despite Karl Theodor Jaspers’ “Axial Age” hypothesis regarding changes in philosophical and religious thought in the ancient world, the sources of ancient human civilization were not in Greece, but rather in the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China. The Assyrian and Sumerian cultures in the Near East, that is, the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia, created the world’s earliest brilliant civilization. Greece learned its letters, literature, art, religion, science, and technology from the civilizations of Eastern Mesopotamia and Egypt. The contemporary British intellectual historian J. J. Clark, in his *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and*

Western Thought, pointed out that the Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations were the ancestors of the West, and that the East was the root of Western culture.

Italy during the Renaissance was the first to see Greek documents retranslated from Arabic into Italian and develop new ideas from them. Therefore, the Renaissance started from an exchange between European and Arabic culture. This also shows that in history, Baghdad was at the center of the global economy, accepting and reforming new ideas from Asia, and then spreading them to the region of Islamic Spain, and from there to Europe.

The “four great inventions”—the compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing—were the Chinese civilization’s major contributions to world civilization. During the cultural exchanges between China and the West in ancient times, these four major Chinese inventions were introduced to Europe through the intermediary link of the Arab world and had a great impact on Europe’s development. They directly stimulated the development of modern science and technology in Europe and promoted the transformation of European society. Marx wrote:

Gunpowder, compass, and printing—these are the three major inventions that foretell the arrival of bourgeois society. Gunpowder blasted the knight class to pieces, the compass opened the world market and established colonies, and printing became a tool of Protestantism. In general, it has become a means of scientific renaissance, and has become the most powerful lever to create the necessary preconditions for spiritual development.

The absorption of Chinese culture by the European Enlightenment revealed the world significance of Confucianism. After the Jesuits who came to China successively translated Chinese classics into European languages and published them, they inspired European Enlightenment thinkers, of whom Voltaire is representative, and gradually formed the “China craze” in Europe in the eighteenth century. The emergence of the word “Chinoiserie” reflected France’s enthusiasm for China at that time.

Some scholars describe European culture as having a history of “self-sanctification,” making it seem that the influence of foreign cultures on Europe is insignificant. The reason why Europe could develop through cultural exchanges lies in its strong self-adjustment and development abilities. But Eurocentric views are untenable from the long-term perspective of world history.

The Concept of Mutual Learning between Civilizations: The Theoretical Basis for Understanding the History of Cultural Exchanges between China and the West

When cultures communicate, any culture encountering a different culture has problems re-understanding and interpreting it; there are always the issues of variation and adaptation. The reinterpreted foreign culture undergoes processing by the interpreters, who filter it according to their own cultural structure. This filtered, reinterpreted foreign culture is quite different from the original foreign culture, but has its self-sufficiency. Hans-Georg Gadamer, the contemporary master of hermeneutics, has said that prejudice is not necessarily inaccurate or wrong, and that it does not inevitably distort the truth.

It was thus inevitable that Voltaire’s interpretation of Confucius proceeded under the domination of his “prejudice.” He held high the banner of the Enlightenment in France, opposed religious persecution, and opposed irrational religious fanaticism. At this time, the “Confucianism” introduced to Europe by the Jesuits was a kind of religious tolerance; it was a theory that regarded moral rationality as superior to irrational worship, which naturally attracted Voltaire’s attention. In this way, Confucius became the Confucius in Voltaire’s eyes, and Chinese religion became the Chinese religion after Voltaire’s elaboration of it.

Voltaire’s ideal political system was an enlightened monarchy, which was completely different from ancient Greek democracy and Roman monarchy. No ideological weapon could be found in the West, while the French aristocracy and the priesthood seriously hindered social development. At this time, the Chinese political system, introduced to Europe by Jesuits in China—an organic combination of the

emperor's autocratic power and the examination and civil service systems, which made the country well-run and the society prosperous—provided them with an Oriental model. Confucius became the ideal of Enlightenment thinkers, and the Chinese political system became their model.

The development and transformation of any mature culture is driven by its own internal transformation needs and by knowledge and ideas acquired through exchanges with foreign cultures. The Enlightenment thinkers borrowed part of Confucianism, but all the goals they achieved were determined according to Europe's own cultural traditions.

In the process of world communication, the absorption and utilization of Chinese culture by European and American countries in order to develop their own culture demonstrates Chinese culture's worldwide significance. This also shows that the spread of Chinese culture in various countries around the world will produce different variations—which is a basic law of cultural exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations.

Re-understanding the Modern Significance of Chinese Culture in the Comparison of Civilizations

The nineteenth century became a century dominated by the West, and China fell under the guns of the great powers. Beginning from that time, and lasting for a hundred years, was an era of “regarding the West as a teacher.” China, through its difficult process of integrating into the world, has refreshed its own spiritual world; tolerance and learning have enabled China to complete the new metabolism of its culture.

At present, China has begun to embrace the world with an equal attitude, so the issues of determining how to treat one's own history and how to deal with the position of traditional culture represented by Confucianism in people's spiritual world have become unavoidable. China needs to understand its own culture through long periods of history, and to examine its own culture from the broader perspective of world cultural development, i.e., “study China in the world,” as Mr. Liang Qichao described it.

The thinkers of Europe's Enlightenment era had to ponder how to bring thought back to the world, let history get out from theology, and let reason direct life, but in the long history of human civilization, the Chinese civilization was the first to complete the transition from a religious institutional culture to a secular one. Chinese wisdom had a whole set of theories and methods about maintaining morality and ideals in secularized life and making people become "moral persons." In the modernized lifestyles of today, traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism has become the spiritual home of the Chinese people, demonstrating its modern significance.

After the Zhou dynasty replaced the Shang in 1046 BCE, King Wen of Zhou changed the Shang dynasty's practice of taking possession of everything and placing shamans first. He established a culture of "putting people first before spirits" and of "respecting morality and protecting the people." From then on, Chinese culture began changing from its heaven-worship and social disorder to a "moral community" centered on the concern for human life and a system that distinguished primary wives and concubines. By Confucius' time (ca. 500 BCE), this major transformation was, in theory at least, completed.

By the time of Confucius, Chinese thought had already basically completed the transformation from gods to man, and the focus of Confucian theory was on the human world. Confucius did not completely abandon "heaven," which with "gods" still had their status in Confucius' thought as ultimate supports, but they were spiritual supports that could be gazed upon from afar but not reached. The focus of his pursuit was to find the "way of heaven" from the "way of humanity." Therefore, Confucianism is neither atheistic nor theistic—one can call it a "distant theism."

This distinctive characteristic of Confucian culture created two fundamental features of Chinese culture at the same time:

Religious tolerance. Confucian culture, which aims to respect heaven and emulate the ancestors, does not have the religious characteristics of monotheism at all, but has created a cultural outlook of "harmony in diversity" and a spirit of religious tolerance. China has become one of the very few countries in the history of world civilization that has had almost no religious wars. At the same time, it has an inclusive

and open attitude toward all foreign religions. Tolerance is an essential feature of modern society. Chinese culture has accepted the introduction of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, and it promotes the development of Chinese culture through interaction with foreign cultures. This teaches the world today that it should: (1) firmly abide by the perspective of civilizations that promote equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness; (2) learn with a broad mind the inner values of different civilizations; (3) respect the explorations of people in different countries on their own paths of development; (4) transcend barriers among civilizations through exchange, conflicts through mutual learning, and competition with coexistence; (5) extol the universal values that are contained in Chinese civilization; and (6) promote the building of a community with a shared destiny for all humanity.

Cultural diversity. The “great tradition” of Chinese culture that has Confucianism at its core has become the mainstream of our society, but as Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang have written in *Zhongguo minjian zongjiao shi* (*A History of Chinese Folk Religion*): “Chinese culture does not consist only of the [heritage of] the Three Great Kings, the Five Emperors, the Eight Laws, and the Nine Regions, but also has its fiery, dynamic side, full of life and vitality.” This is the “little tradition” of folk religion. The organic unity of the great tradition and the little tradition, the interaction between Confucian orthodoxy and folk religions, constitute a diverse and vivid aspect of Chinese culture. At the same time, the integration and exchange of the cultures of many peoples is the most important feature of the diversity of Chinese culture. Our hometowns lie both inside and outside the Great Wall, and the history of multi-ethnic integration has made Chinese culture splendid and colorful, thus forming distinctive cultural characteristics that are completely different from those of countries with a single ethnic culture. For a long time, the West has interpreted China through the experience of European modernization, and has been unable to understand the history of multi-ethnic integration in China. This is a manifestation of the West’s ignorance of Chinese history and culture.

Studying all civilizations and cultures with an equal and inclusive attitude rests on a foundation of self-confidence in one’s own culture. Returning to a healthy cultural

mentality in which “each cherishes one’s own beauty, respects others’ beauty, and finds common ground therein” (in the words of Fei Xiaotong) is the basis for studying and dealing with the relationship between Eastern and Western cultures.

Translated by Thomas E. Smith