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## A World of Plural and Pluralist Civilizations

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### The Prevalence of Unitary Views of Civilizations

In these brief remarks I am making two basic points. Civilizations are best thought of as plural and pluralist. Despite their firm conviction of being unrivalled in their uniqueness, like all other major civilizations both China and America are on this central point quite normal and unexceptional. This pluralist perspective is in sharp disagreements with both conservative and liberal arguments advanced with great self-confidence and to great acclaim in both East and West. Specifically, this pluralist perspective differs from conservative arguments that think of civilizations as unitary cultural programs, organized hierarchically around uncontested core values. And it differs also from liberal views based on the firm conviction of the existence of unambiguous, uncontested, liberal criteria for judging good, civilized conduct.

Civilizations are social forms of organization above the level of the nation and below the global world. Historically civilizations are based on urban forms of life and a division of labor by which urban elites extract resources from peasants. At the center of civilizations we typically find religious traditions which often intermingle with secular, specifically literary ones.

The unitary view that informs conservative and liberal thought was a European invention of the 18th century. In the 19th century it was enshrined in the belief of the existence of one standard of civilization. That standard was grounded in race, ethnic affiliation, religion and a firm conviction in the superiority of European civilization over all others. The distinction between civilized and uncivilized peoples, however, is not specific to the European past. Today, it enjoys broad support among many conservative supporters of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* – a book that was translated into 39 languages. It is also held by many liberals who are committed to improving the rule of law and global standards of good governance. Furthermore, this unitary view is widely popular in all of today's major civilizations – American, Chinese, European, Indian, Japanese, Russian and Islamic. Everywhere and at all times so-called barbarians are believed to have knocked on the doors of civilizations.

Huntington restates this old, unitary thesis for our times. His became arguably the most influential book published on international relations since the end of the Cold War. For Huntington civilizations are

coherent, consensual, invariant, and equipped with a state-like capacity to act. Huntington insists on a unitary conception of civilizations but accepts multiple standards of proper conduct in a world of numerous civilizations. The correct anticipation of 9/11 gave his book a claim to validity that helps account for its continued relevance. Less noticed in public than in academic discourse is the fact that Huntington greatly overstates his case. Numerous analyses have established beyond any reasonable doubt that clashes occur primarily within rather than between civilizations. Furthermore, the book's broad appeal has not been undermined by the failure of the second of its two main claims. Since the end of the Cold War, the relations between Sinic and American civilizations are summarized best by terms such as encounter or engagement rather than clash.

In comparison to Huntington, Liberals follow an inverse logic. Unlike Huntington, they are often more willing to acknowledge the existence of diverse cultural programs in a given civilization. And unlike Huntington, they have a difficult time letting go of the notion of a single standard of good intercivilizational conduct. This is illustrated by vigorous and extended debates over failing states, standards of good governance, property rights, and transparent markets. On all of these issues, and many others, liberal arguments often proceed from the unquestioned assumption of the existence of a single standard of proper conduct. In liberal American and European public discourse the West therefore is widely referred to in the singular: as a universal, substantive form of perfectibility that is integrating all parts of the world, based on the growth of Western reason.

A very similar, anti-Western counter-discourse, also steeped in Western reasoning, exists in Asia and is vigorously promoted by conservatives and liberals alike. The voices proclaiming the dawn of Asia's civilizational primacy may shift from yesterday's Japan, to today's China and tomorrow's India. But these voices are growing louder. Like "Orientalism," "Occidentalism" characterizes East and West in the singular. Despite the ideological and geographical diversity of those holding to a unitary conception of civilization, such a unitary view is intellectually misguided and politically dangerous.

### **Plural and Pluralist Civilizations: America and China**

Civilizations, I argue here, are pluralist. The recent and distant history of the "West" invalidates the claim that it has been culturally cohesive with an unchanging collective identity. Recently, after World War II, the most determined enemy of the West, Germany, was firmly integrated into a coalition of "Western, civilized, democracies" that were seeking to stem the tide of "Eastern, uncivilized, autocracies." Furthermore, in the second half of the 20th century, despite the importance of the Anglo-American model, varieties of capitalist democracies have remained a distinctive feature of the West. In the distant past, Medieval Europe, according to Karl Deutsch, featured six separate civilizational strands: monastic Christianity around the Mediterranean; Latin Christendom in Western and Central Europe; and Byzantium in South-eastern Europe. These three major civilizations were connected by the Afro-Eurasian trade networks of Islam which for centuries took hold on the Iberian Peninsula, as well as elements of two other trading civilizations, Jews and Vikings. The West is undeniably pluralist.

What is true of the West is true of other civilizations. China, for example, does not cohere around uncontested Confucian or Asian values. Instead, just like America, China experiences conflicts over contested truths reflecting its internal pluralism and external context. Chinese Confucianism is as plastic and contested as American Liberalism. Discarded as an imperial institution since the late 19th century and hollowed out as a political ideology, the relevance of various incarnations of New Confucianism is now seen to lie in its humanism. Widely thought to have been a major factor for many of China's ills during the last century, in recent years the Chinese government has vigorously revived Confucianism. This ideology operates on the basis of hierarchical, reciprocal and morally based values. The political qualities that supposedly flow from these values – wisdom, morality, generosity, obligation to respect the interests of others – are now extolled as assets not liabilities.

The ethical and religious concerns of Confucian humanism remain relevant in seeking to address some of contemporary China's pressing problems. Tu Weiming's conceptualization is largely congruent with the writings of Shmuel Eisenstadt and the concept of multiple modernity. For Tu cultural China focuses on the meaning of being Chinese. It is not a geopolitical, linguistic or ethnic concept. Instead cultural China is defined by transnational relationships in Greater China and the fluid borders separating civilization from barbarism. Cultural China emerges from the dialogues within and between these different Chinese worlds, with the erstwhile peripheries of the Chinese world now thrust in the unaccustomed role of helping to civilize China. And outside of China, but in the Sinocentric sphere of cultural influence, contested and contestable traditions of Confucianism can also be found in Japan, Korea and Vietnam. In short in its various incarnations Confucianism is not an essential attribute of Chineseness, rooted in an empire, polity, or modern nation-state. It is instead a cultural resource mobilized primarily along the periphery of transnational Chinese networks.

Furthermore, inside mainland China the tradition of Confucianism is complemented by and competing with alternative traditions of Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, popular religion, atheism and secularism. Perhaps even more striking is the regional revival of multiple cultural traditions. China is divided in five ways – east, west, north, south and center. Relying on overly schematic and simplifying terms for purpose of this lecture only, I would argue that the cosmopolitanism and economic dynamism of China's coastal areas and the patriotism and relative economic backwardness of China's heartland constitute multiple traditions that provide the fodder for vibrant debates and disagreements inside China's civilization. Other civilizations have a very large stake in these debates. Numerous dramatic transformations in contemporary China evoke the image of a very large man rolling over in a very small bathtub. In doing so that man creates some very big waves and cannot help but make a mess on the bathroom floor that may affect his neighbors.

As an American speaking in Beijing, I have chosen American and Chinese civilizations as two examples for the thesis that civilizations are plural and pluralist and that in this central respect China, like America, is a perfectly normal and unexceptional civilization. In a book published this past summer under the title *Civilizations in World Politics* I have made the analogous case for all of the world's other major civilizations. Concepts like "East" and "West" have never been able to describe accurately our past. They do not describe accurately our present. And they will never describe accurately our future. These categories create a make-believe world in which intellectuals who are trying to gain fame and fortune can wage their intellectual battles and in which politicians who attempt to gain or consolidate power can mislead their publics into unnecessary and risky political adventures or military confrontations.

By their mere existence, civilizations undercut both the conservative confidence in the superiority of military power and the liberal presumption that universalistic secular liberal norms are inherently superior to all others. "How many divisions has the Pope?" Josef Stalin asked derisively, a few decades before a charismatic Polish leader of the Catholic Church pushed the Soviet Union into the dustbin of history. And if the values of secular liberalism were naturally overwhelmingly attractive, then there would be no need to cultivate that attraction as liberals have so assiduously tried to do during the last 200 years. Attraction would be rooted instead in the unquestioned acceptance of the universal standard that secular liberalism provides. The politics of civilizations deserve our attention because they both undercut prevalent conservative and liberal preconceptions and undermine cherished notions in the social sciences and humanities.

As is true of all other major civilizations, in both the American and the Chinese cases the internal pluralism of civilizations is reinforced by the larger context in which they are embedded. That context is not the international state system or international markets, frequently deployed concepts that suffer from excessive sparseness and abstraction. It is instead a global ecumene – a concept that describes a universal system of knowledge and practices. This global ecumene expresses not a common standard, but a loose sense of shared values entailing often contradictory notions of diversity in a common humanity. This loose sense of shared values centers on the material and psychological well-being of all humans. "Well-

being” and the rights of all “humans” are no longer the prerogative or product of any one civilization or constellation of civilizations or political structures or ideologies. Instead, technology serving human well-being and norms of human rights are processes that have taken on a life of their own and provide the script for all civilizations. This ecumene does not specify the political route toward implementation. It does offer a script, often not adhered to, that provides in all of today’s civilizations the basis for political authority and legitimacy. All states, polities and empires claim to serve the well-being of individuals. And all individuals are acknowledged to have inherent rights. The existence of these processes enhances the pluralism that inheres in civilizations. They undercut both the intellectual and political imperialism of imposing one single standard on a diverse world all as well as a value relativism that would compel us to accept any and all political practices. These two processes characterize the civilization of modernity that encompasses all major civilizations. They undermine the political capacity to dictate. And they erode the moral basis to abuse.

### **Civilizational Processes**

Civilization is not a condition but a process created by human practices. Those who think of themselves as civilized were, at an earlier time, uncivilized and are always at risk of becoming so in the future. These practices sum, in the aggregate, to civilizational processes such as Americanization or Sinicization. They are producing and reproducing behavioral and symbolic boundaries. In today’s world these processes are nested in one global civilization of modernity.

We can trace transcivilizational engagements and intercivilizational encounters in a variety of different practices. In their internal and external relations, civilizations are marked by debate and disagreements. Contestation generates different processes and outcomes. One such outcome, cultural imperialism, describes the unilateral imposition of the norms and practices of one civilization upon local norms and practices that it seeks to displace or destroy. A second outcome describes the wholesale adoption by local actors of the format but not the content of imported cultural products and practices. Finally, a third outcome, and the one that is most typical in the relations among major civilizations, describes a world of hybridization in which local norms and practices are altered by selectively appropriating imported practices. This is the give and take that defines civilizational processes, the exchange of cultural material – information, ideas, values, norms, and identities. It highlights shifting balances of practices (rather than balances of power) within and between different civilizations.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued here for a view that stresses the pluralism and plurality of a world of civilizations – a world into which China and America fit comfortably as very normal and unexceptional cases. Far from being unique, both China and America are comparable to all other major civilizations. Our world of civilizations is for the most part characterized by intercivilizational encounters and transcivilizational engagements, and only rarely by civilizational clashes. The last three decades in the relations between Sinic and American civilizations provide ample documentation for this proposition. I thus have argued in these remarks that common preconceptions shared alike by conservatives and liberals in both West and East are seriously misguided. Rather than helping us build a better, more diverse world in which all civilizations can teach and all can learn in a common context, these preconceptions risk building a world of fear and walls in which civilizations are reduced to delivering monologues of the one right way – yielding not engagements and encounters but clashes.

Today we live in hard times. Only a year ago the global economy was teetering at the brink of collapse, brought about by the economic selfishness and recklessness of a small group of powerful individuals and institutions operating in the major American and European financial centers. Massive state action pulled global capitalism back from the brink. But it could not prevent the havoc wreaked worldwide on tens of

millions of people. There is a striking similarity in the origins of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and America's financial crisis of 2008. Before 1997 easy money was flowing from Tokyo throughout Asia seeking returns higher than could be earned in Japan. Before 2008, Wall Street had invented and marketed globally new financial products which, it was thought erroneously, had solved the problem of economic risk. In both cases it was the pluralism of economic arrangements in different national economies, states and civilizations that prevented an enormous calamity to become catastrophic. Plural and pluralist civilizations legitimate varieties of institutions and practices. And there is virtue in variety. No one model of market economies – American, European, Indian, Islamic, Japanese or Chinese – embodies all that is efficient and good. Plural and pluralist civilizations thus act like shock absorbers for a world that is simply too complex to yield to a single economic logic. Coordination not clash characterizes this multicivilizational economic world.

In the future, we may, however, be heading toward a clash and potential violence of a different sort. It would implicate Toynbee's Civilization – spelled with a capital C and in the singular. All of humankind and many other species and ecosystems sharing planet Earth are confronting a variety of threats to Civilization's ongoing physical viability. In this formulation, the essentialism of Civilizational identity is physical rather than primordial, discursive, or dispositional. It may spur social and political movements for a common Civilizational community of fate, somewhat analogously to earlier national communities of fate. But even in this formulation of a different kind of Civilizational clash, politics (of science, social movement, education, and many other domains) will continue to be central. It remains an open question whether plural and pluralist civilizations harbor sufficient innovative potential and learning capacities to generate successful coping strategies for defending Civilization spelled with a capital C and in the singular.

The opening line of Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, "The Ballad of East and West," suggests that the two shall never meet. Kipling was wrong. Civilizations are most similar not in their cultural coherence, isolation or tendency toward clash, but in their pluralist differences, in their plurality, and in their encounters and engagements. We should resist the temptation of excessive simplification entailed in all binary distinctions. Instead, we should embrace the intellectual and political opportunities of what one scholar has called the "contaminated cosmopolitanism" of our civilizational world. This concept captures nicely the messy co-occurrence of sameness and difference that is the defining trait of a world of plural and pluralist civilizations.

Thank you.