

Dialogue on Civilizations

By THOMAS S. AXWORTHY

I N 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated an important idea at the Boao Forum for Asia. The President called for a conference on dialogues among Asian civilizations. In May 2019, this idea was actualized with a conference held in Beijing, focusing on six parallel sessions of multiple platforms that will promote exchange and mutual learning among the delegates as well as celebrating the contributions of Asian civilizations through a food festival, a cultural carnival, and youth gatherings.

This initiative should be welcomed for two reasons: First, on substance, President Xi Jinping has highlighted the concept of civilization, one of the most important and most debated constructs in world history. Second, the emphasis is on dialogue and mutual learning, a process greatly needed in a wired world prone to miscalculation, stereotyping, and sometimes outright deceit.

Human beings have multiple identities and loyalties – to self, family, community, the nation state, and then the broadest of all, a connection with a set of values, a shared history, and common customs and institutions, often broader than the boundaries of any one state. Arnold Toynbee, the British historian who wrote the 12-volume *A Study of History* organized around 21 different world civilizations, said that “civilization is a work of art” and the components of that artistic construct usually include highly developed forms of government, urbanization, culture, wealth, language, and religion. China is a civilization based within the boundaries of one state, for example, but Chinese civilization has impacted Korea, Singapore, the Chinese diaspora and through much of its history, Japan. Western civilization is made up of many states in Europe, North America and extends to Australia and New Zealand. Starting with the individual and family and adding layer upon

layer of different organizations, societies, and communities, civilization is the broadest and most ambitious secular idea or construct that humankind has ever invented. Fernand Braudel, author of *A History of Civilizations*, writes poetically, “Civilizations, like sand dunes, are firmly anchored to the hidden contours of the earth”; and that “What we call civilization is the distant and far distant past clinging to life determined to impose itself.”

Toynbee wrote of 21 civilizations, but most of them have not survived to influence modern times. Two from Asia have endured and thrived, and they are the oldest and among the most influential civilizations in world history, with two of the most seminal thinkers the world has ever produced. In the 5th century BC, the world experienced an Axial age or turning point: shaping this pivot, amazingly there was the near simultaneous appearance of Siddhartha Gautama (563-480 BC), the Buddha, and Confucius (551-479 BC) whose insights and ethics have influenced the world ever since.

India has one of the world’s oldest civilizations, the Harappan civilization of the Indus River Valley, which lasted 1,000 years from 2500 to 1500 BC. It had cities like Mohenjo-daro with populations between 30,000 and 60,000, writing (not yet deciphered), a large agricultural base, and sophisticated sanitation facilities. The Indus Valley civilization was conquered by the Aryans (about 1500 BC), and they in turn introduced the *Vedas*, the sacred books of Hindu civilization (between 1200-200 BC).

India was also home to one of the world’s most influential thinkers, Siddhartha Gautama, who when he was a young man left his privileged home on a journey to gain understanding about life or enlightenment. Buddhism has taught ever since that the Buddha’s enlightenment can be achieved by every human being by developing character qualities of wisdom and compas-



Sino-Indian joint creation of dance drama is staged in Fuzhou on December 4, 2017.

sion. Compassion is active sympathy or willingness to bear the pain of others. Eliminating suffering was the Buddha's ideal and this ethical stance has animated transformational leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who freed India from British colonialism.

The Shang and Zhou dynasties of ancient China developed around the Yellow River just as the Indian civilization was nurtured by the Indus. The Shang Dynasty developed writing, government, and bronze technology. The Oracle Script of the Shang is the oldest form of Chinese writing. During the Zhou Dynasty, successors to the Shang in 1100 BC, saw the arrival of Confucius, a teacher from the state of Lu, who dreamt about reviving the golden age of the Duke of Zhou, 500 years before the birth of the Chinese philosopher. Learning is the essence of Confucius practical ethics found in the *Analects*, the history of the dynamic and thought-provoking exchanges between Confucius and his disciples. Learning entails transforming the human spirit through music, ritual, calligraphy, and arithmetic as well as enlightening the mind. Society is an extended family in which harmony should prevail through self-

cultivation and restraint. Indeed, the emphasis on family is still one of the main aspects of Chinese civilization where today the extended family continues to be the Chinese ideal rather than the Western practice of sending aging parents to live in care institutions. And how was harmony to be achieved? Confucius replied to the question, "Is there one word that could guide a person through life?" The master replied: "Reciprocity – never impose on another what you would not choose for yourself."

Enlightenment, compassion, learning, harmony, self-restraint, and the golden rule of reciprocity, these are the transformative ideas and legacy of Asian civilizations.

The May 2019 conference on Asian civilizations not only assessed in detail the above contributions that Asia brought to the world, but its purpose was dialogue and mutual learning. This objective contrasts greatly with the approach that others have taken in the concept of civilization as the lens to view world history.

The resurgence of civilization as an organizing construct in international relations is largely due to the



The Splendor of Asia – An Exhibition of Asian Civilizations starts at the National Museum of China on May 13, 2019.

impact of the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. In his influential 1996 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington wrote, “The central theme of this book is that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.” Huntington believed that the fault lines between different civilizations would be the primary source of conflict in the world of the 21st century. He titled one of his chapters, for example, “The West and the Rest.”

Like Huntington, the InterAction Council in the mid-1990s also recognized the diversity in world civilizations, but unlike the American scholar it did not focus on the fault lines. It focused instead on commonality. In a publication entitled *Bridging the Divide*, the Council sought to look at the common ethical base of the world’s great civilizations. Helmut Schmidt, the late chancellor of Germany and founder of the Council, wrote, “The clash of civilizations can be avoided.”

Schmidt and his colleagues emphasized that the ethic of responsibility was a key connector between world civilizations, and under Schmidt’s guidance the Council issued in 1997 *The Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities*, an attempt to balance rights and obligations, which builds on all world civilizations and faiths.

Civilization is a powerful concept. Asian civilizations have made tremendous contributions to the world’s advancement and especially to the development of the world’s ethics. Mutual learning and dialogue, not fault lines and conflict, are the objectives of the 2019 Beijing meeting and these are the goals that the InterAction Council has long supported. The history of the world is the history of civilizations, and the future of the world will depend on those civilizations knowing more about each other and finding grounds for cooperation. ■

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