

CHAPTER V

WESTERN CIVILIZATION: ITS ESSENCE, FEATURES, AND IMPACT

ZHU MAJIE

Since the end of the Cold War, the effect of cultural factors on international relations has been increasing. Of the rich and colorful cultures of the world, Western civilization occupies an apparently dominant position and its influence is thus particularly significant. This article tries to explore the essence and features of Western civilization, and their impact on international relations.

THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Regarding the meaning of culture, scholars tend to different views, but the majority agree that in a broad sense and generally, it is the totality of physical and spiritual wealth created by humankind in historical social practice. In a narrow sense, culture stands for the social ideology and its corresponding systems and institutions. These include ideas, thoughts and relevant regimes and involve politics, law, morality, art, religion and science.

Some see civilization and culture as the same thing, but most believe that culture includes civilization, and that under given conditions the latter will re-create culture. Civilization is culture developed to a higher level; it is relatively stable, but does not stop at one level. Western civilization is a high level or stage of Western culture in the process of its evolution. Modern Western civilization reached one peak, but contemporary Western civilization has reached even higher. The study of the impacts of Western civilization on international relations generally is conducted in its narrow, rather than its broad, sense. It begins from its essence, and explores the impacts of the values and mentalities of Western civilization on the behaviors of the actors, that is, the impacts and constraints of civilization on sovereign states, state blocs, as well as their leaders. Apparently, in foreign affairs, leaders' alternatives in international behaviors often are based on their ideals, faiths and value orientations.

After great changes through the feudal to the capitalist society, Western civilization developed step by step and took its shape particularly in modern times. In the evolution of European civilization (mainly in Western Europe), the Middle Ages lasted more than

1000 years. During the dark period of the feudal society there was great social turbulence and great migrations of nations. Consequently, the Roman World was replaced by the Germanic World.

Following "the Renaissance" in the 14th century to 16th century, the "liberal spirit" has become the world spirit in Europe. Thereafter, Europe underwent "the Enlightenment," "the Industrial Revolution" and "the Scientific and Technological Revolution". People freed themselves from "God" in their minds, and there was a great leap in their understanding leading to enormous development in social productivity. On the European Continent, the development of commerce, the rise of the handicraft industry, the emergence of the cities and towns and the formation of civil society resulted in capitalist society in Europe. The rising capitalist class gradually became a force that could not be ignored in society. These changes in the economic and ideological spheres had created conditions for political revolutions. The British "Glorious Revolution," the French "Bourgeois Revolution" as well as the America's "War of Independence" brought the Western bourgeoisie to the political stage, where they have had great influence on the process of human history, and raised Western civilization to a new level.

In the long process of history, European civilization rose from Greece, and North American civilization rose from Western Europe: both have shown their vigor only in modern times. The American civilization is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon tradition which is homogenous with Western civilization: the main body of the American civilization was inherited from, and developed on the basis of, European civilization. Although it was formed in the process of opening up the new continent of North America, its basic features and essential intention can be traced back to the same origins as Europe.

The essence of the Western civilization is nothing but human rights. Professor Samuel P. Huntington at Harvard University regarded the *Magna Carta* as the essence of Western civilization, pointing to basic laws to protect civil and political rights, which are exactly what human rights mean in the West. Its most basic contents are democracy, freedom, equality, the right to pursue happiness and property, and the corresponding institutions. These contents express Western values. In modern history, Western civilization has constantly had great impact on the world. Western civilization is in large part found in Western developed countries, and that of the United States and Western Europe in particular are dominant in the world. U.S.-led Western countries have tried hard to set Western civilization as the model for the rest of the world by their

advantages in the economy, politics, military and science, the purpose of which is to turn Western civilization into the universal civilization of the whole world. The "human rights diplomacy" they pursue is the reflection of Western values and begins with their need for an overall strategy to dominate the world. The human rights issue has thus become one of the major issues with regard to cultural factors in contemporary international relations. It is one of the hot-spots that have created friction and collision when the various civilizations in the world intermingle.

FUNDAMENTAL FEATURES

Western civilizations rose from the same origin, though, their respective development differs, and the levels of development in different historic periods are not the same. However, they share the following common features:

Firstly, a salvationist spirit and sense of mission. With self-arrogance this runs all through the history of the West, led by the United States. This spirit came from Christianity. In the Western society, the impact of Christianity on people's spirits and morality has been both long and profound. Christianity, as an ideology to which people devote themselves for their destiny, beliefs and expectations due to its holy nature, has penetrated into every part of society. As a paramount subject for worship, God dominates human being's thought, freedom, customs and ideas. This Christian doctrine engenders a universal spirit among its followers, so that saving the world becomes their mission. In the past, the soldiers of the West marched out to conquer the world "for God".¹ Today, Western leaders stress the importance of taking the leading role and feel an obligation to defend the free world and to promote and strengthen democratic values in the world as their "Holy Mission". At this point, all this is focused on the United States as the only superpower, though the "sense of superiority," "the salvationist spirit" and the sense of mission with self-arrogance have always been a "main spiritual pillar" of the American people.²

Secondly, expansionism. Western civilization constantly expanded outward in the process of modern social development and therefore is labeled the "blue civilization". The color of blue symbolizes the ocean which attracts to adventure, aggressiveness and conquest. In modern history, Netherlands, Spain, Britain and the U.S. successively have dominated the world. At the peak of Western capitalist development, many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America were reduced to being their colonies or semi-colonies. The

Western lifestyle, ideology and social system were also spread there. Westerners used gunboats to open up new frontiers, and the Bible to spread God's will. They took new markets with the force of goods and advanced science and technology. Therefore, the history of the Western civilization is also the history of expansion.

After World War II, there was the movement of national liberation all over the world, and many former colonies and semi-colonies became independent countries. But the Western countries have never changed their attitude and ideology toward the newly independent countries. They still try hard to impose Western social models and values on others. In the second half of the 20th century, what the US-led West has done to Asia, Africa and Latin America clearly demonstrates the expansionist nature of Western civilization.

Thirdly, individualism. The most important value of Western civilization is individualism, which is one of its most prominent marks. Individualism was an ideological weapon used by the rising European capitalist class to oppose autocracy and the oppression of the feudal nobles. In the West, people advocated independent struggle and the pursuit the rights of individual emancipation, individual choice, and individual freedom and happiness. The pursuit of individual rights is known as the "Romeo and Juliet Revolution". Individualism was very popular in the West in the 19th century, and reached its peak in the 20th century, dominating the ideological sphere.³ Western individualism has now become a standard of morality. In the United States, individualism has become a highly evaluated moral virtue: the cowboy who can do whatever he wants is a heroic image. The mentality of self-importance, unrestricted behavior and an aspiration for outlaw conduct have become an important component of the nation's ideology.

Fourthly, liberalism. Individualism and liberalism are the twins of the Western civilization. The concept of freedom is the main ideology and pillar in Western society. One of the flags used by the capitalist class to fight against the feudal nobles was to strive for freedom. They flaunted the freedoms of faith, speech and pursuit of property. "The Statue of Liberty" has become the symbol of the West. Francis Fukuyama said that the two world wars in the last century and the following revolution and the great turbulence "forced Europe and North America, which are at the forefront position of human civilization, more progressively to carry out their freedom."⁴ The "four freedoms"⁵ by the former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Western "Atlantic Charter" both feature the concepts of freedom and democracy of Western civiliza-

tion, known as the Western liberal democracy. In the economic area, the West also stresses the importance of such freedoms as free market, free trade and free competition. Fukuyama believes that the fundamental change that took place in the 20th century was the victory of "economic and political liberalism". From now on, liberalism dominates the material world,⁶ and apparently is regarded as its most representative feature of Western civilization.

Fifthly, utilitarianism. The search for effectiveness and self-interest is the ethical concept of Western civilization. In the West, especially in the United States, utilitarianism is presented sometimes as "idealism" and sometimes as "pragmatism". To seek utility and to be bent solely on interests is a typical feature of the Western bourgeoisie. In the West what must be maintained is interest, rather than principle; there are no friends but only interests; these become the paramount object of worship. Professor S. Huntington is correct in saying that the westerners, while conquering the world, "fought not only for God, but for gold." Focusing on utility and interest is both a norm of conduct and value orientation in the West. The U.S.-led Western countries handling of international affairs is a clear demonstration of the ethical concept of utilitarianism. Their "utility" lies in the desire to dominate the world, and their "interest" lies in the desire that their demand for self-interest be met. Whether the human rights issue is linked with the trade issue, or whether sanctions are imposed on other nations, or whether aid is given to other nations, the most fundamental criteria by which they make these judgments is their interest.

POWER POLITICS UNDER THE PRETEXT OF CIVILIZATION

Western civilization has significant influence in the process of human history. It is like a two-edged sword with one edge having the positive and obverse function, and the other the negative and reverse function. In modern history, the 19th century was the time of the magnificent development of human civilization. The Japanese Meiji Restoration made Japan richer and more powerful by its modernization program. Western "natural rights" thought and the ethical concept of utilitarianism had a deep influence on the Japanese society. But the Chinese Reform Movement of 1898 failed, leading to the execution of some reformers and the flight abroad of others. In the 20th century, humankind suffered greatly from the disaster of two world wars. Great turbulence, divisions and reconfiguration of the world system took place along with liberation

movements for national independence. The colonial system collapsed completely. The economy of the four Asian dragons took off, China has risen, and the Southeast Asian nations also have seen fast development. In addition, other non-Western countries have undoubtedly borrowed useful experience from the West in their process of modernization. But they do not intend to accept those things from the West that were negative, dispirited and destabilizing in their national conditions when they wanted to promote their own excellent cultural traditions. This makes some westerners uncomfortable; they cry in surprise that "the clash of civilizations will be the battle lines of the future," and "the Western people must unite closely or they will be hung one by one."⁷ Faced with the changes of the world situation, the US-led Western countries, despite differences among themselves, adopt almost the same stance in the following aspects due to their common values:

Firstly, Pursuing "Human Rights Diplomacy". Western politicians active in the international arena are concerned mostly with their own interests. Western values have become the tools to pursue these interests, and the most universally valuable tool is human rights. Western politicians see human rights diplomacy as their "excellent weapon," "the most important advantage for democratic countries to extend their influence."⁸ Some Western countries led by the United States constantly criticize other countries at the meetings of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and those that are accused are almost without exception developing countries. They do so arrogantly because they always think that their heavenly mandate is to spread the so-called freedom and social justice to the whole of mankind by setting their democracy as the example. The Western lifestyle is the only beacon to be followed by other nation states, and the Western social system is the example that should be copied by other societies. Therefore, Western values should serve as the standard for the international order and international behaviors. Anything that goes against Western values can never be seen as right but should be criticized as "autocracy," "dictatorship," or "evil empire"; it must thus be contained and sanctioned.

While discussing human rights issues, Deng Xiaoping once pointed out that,

Some Western countries, on the pretext that China has an unsatisfactory human rights record and an irrational and illegitimate socialist system, attempt

to jeopardize our national sovereignty. . . . National sovereignty is far more important than human rights, but they often infringe upon the sovereignty of poor and weak countries of the Third World. Their talk about human rights, freedom, and democracy is only designed to safeguard the interests of the strong, rich countries, which take advantages of their strength to bully weak countries, and which pursue hegemony and practice power politics.⁹

Western countries, led by the United States, have followed an absurd logic, that is, they see those people who oppose legal governments as human rights fighters. Any country that punishes in accordance with the law those who jeopardize the national security will be accused of "violating human rights". Any country that does not allow activities aimed against its political system will be accused of "violating civil liberties". Some Western countries use human rights issues to interfere in other nations' internal affairs, violate others' national sovereignty, and even overturn others' state power. That is the essence of the human rights diplomacy of the West.

Secondly, Dominating International Institutions. Western countries impose their own will on international institutions in order to make them reflect Western values and serve the interests of the West. In his article "The Clash of Civilizations" Professor Huntington identifies one of the realities of today's world, that is, that the West, led by the United States, is at an extraordinary peak of power. It dominates international political and security institutions, and replaces the free world by the term "the world community". Decisions made at the United Nations Security Council or in the International Monetary Fund that reflect the interests of the West are presented to the world as reflecting the desires of the world community. "The West in effect is using international institutions, military power and economic resources to run the world in ways that will maintain Western predominance, protect Western interests and promote Western political and economic values." They are trying every means "to induce other peoples to adopt Western ideas concerning democracy and human rights."¹⁰

It must be pointed out here that, the United Nations human rights activities are often seriously disturbed by some Western countries. They are trying to impose their own values and human rights standards as universal principles so that the UN could be used to

play a role according to Western interests, and influence the world ideologically and strategically. The humanitarian interference by the UN constantly falls into the hands of the West, and some Western countries use it as an excuse to play power politics, to interfere in other nations' internal affairs, and to violate other nations' sovereignty. The Somali case is an outstanding example. The UN peace-keeping operation in Somali was totally dominated by U.S. will. The United States at the beginning favored use of force, thus escalating military conflict there; then, when the issue could not be solved, the U.S. immediately pulled troops out and got away. No wonder the Secretary General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros Ghali at that time had to speak publicly that it was "a failure," and even the Congress controlled by the Republican Party acknowledged that "it was a complete failure and the shame of the Americans."

Thirdly, Using Commercial Power. Under the new world situation, it is much less feasible to impose Western values on others arbitrarily. Instead, the West increasingly uses the influence of the market economy to spread their free democracy ideas and values. This has become a very important cultural strategy of the West. In the Western society today, the market has become increasingly important, dominating and commercializing almost all other social aspects, including the cultural. The U.S.-led West constantly stresses the importance of the production and export of its cultural products because this can produce not only enormous commercial profits, but also great political and social effects.

The West sees trade not merely as commercial activities, but as a basic channel of personal contact to exchange views and values. In the advance of the modern market economy towards globalization, the export of Western cultural products, especially those of the United States, has been increasing. The application of high technology to cultural products has made Western cultural products more stimulating, attractive and competitive. Western countries are trying very hard to support industries relating to ideology, such as movies, television, broadcasting and compact CDs, fax machines and computers for Internet, etc, and to create conditions for them to enter other markets. Through satellite relays, the spread of Western culture has been increasingly powerful.

The West adopts a protection policy on intellectual property rights, and constantly launches attacks on some developing countries, aiming at better extending Western values. In his article "Western Culture Clashes with the East" in *The Christian Science Monitor*, American correspondent Dunklaton Jones wrote that, in Asia,

the rapid development of trade, technology, and the tourism industry has been combined with the great flow of ideas, personnel and pop culture formed in the post-Cold War era. He also noted a change in the social values of Asians due to the flow of the Western culture. The fact that their social values are remodeled after being reduced has upset the Asians, but this is the social effect the West is pursuing.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The challenges that Western civilization faces are mainly of two aspects. One is the increasing Western social crises, the other is the collision with other civilizations. Anyone who has been to Western countries must see such realities as the increase in suicide, drug abuse, violence and crime; this has become a chronic and stubborn disease in the society. In the "free lands" of the United States, the most powerful country of the West, there are two million violent crimes on an annual basis with up to six million victims. The United States has been the country with the highest criminal rate in the world. In the U.S., there are half a million rape cases annually, almost one case every minute. Again in the U.S. the private possession and carrying of arms is legal according to the Constitution. It is estimated that there are 220 million guns in private hands, nearly every citizen with a gun, leading to one million shooting incidents every year. The U.S. is the country that has the largest number of prisoners in the world — a total number of one and half million. It has the world's largest drug market and also has the highest rate of drug abuse among developed countries: twenty million people abuse marijuana, six million people take cocaine, five million use heroin, with a half million people dying every year due to drug abuse. Facing such a serious social problem, President Clinton once cried out in alarm: "If we do not take action against crime, violence and drug abuse, we will be destroyed."

The Futurist, a U.S. journal, once published an article entitled "The Increasing Cultural Crisis of the West," which said that, according to the World Health Organization, "since the early 1950s, the number of men and women who committed suicide in developed countries has been increasing. The sorrowful thing in particular is that the rising number of suicides are mainly from teenagers and young adults." This is the modern "pestilence" of Western civilization. "Modern Western culture does not supply them with any strong guidance, proper world outlook and clear morality. Facing the transition period of life, they are at a loss as to what to do."

They always feel caught in a confused world and experience a crisis of belief in the future. This reflects the collapse of Western values. Western civilization has made it possible for many people to enjoy a rich life, but young people cannot overcome perplexity and sadness. Even if the merciful God got to the abyss of misery, he would be less likely to make them really enjoy the freedom and happiness of the Western civilization.

The friction and collision in the convergence of different civilizations in the world also strikes a blow to the Western civilization. The West that always regards itself as the center sees this challenge as a threat. As a result, various theories of threat and conflicts spring up. While some people in the West are celebrating the victory of liberalism and of the Western civilization in the world, they may also find that it is not at all the peaceful prosperous world in which Western civilization is dominant. Since the Cold War ended, the world has moved into a transitional period towards multi-polarization. It will take a long time to shape a new order of international relations, but the key principle governing the new order "should be noninterference in other nations' internal affairs and social systems. It would not work to require all the countries in the world to copy the patterns set by the United States, Britain and France."¹¹

Under the new situation, the collision of various kinds of cultures is much greater than before. The main cause of this is that the developed Western countries are using their economic, political and military advantages to impose Western cultures on other countries. This leads to counteraction and resistance by these countries, especially the developing countries. Such resistance is regarded as a revival of "nationalism"; anyone who dares to say "no" to the Western developed countries is listed as "nationalist," and subjected to enormous accusations. In order to protect the Western interests and enable Western civilization to continue to play a global role, Professor Huntington proposed nine measures, stressing in particular cooperation between Europe and North America, enhancing control over the international institutions that could reflect and legitimize Western interests and values, and encouraging non-Western countries to participate in these institutions. He believes that the West should set the basic objective of NATO as "protecting and maintaining Western civilization." The major responsibility of Western leaders is to "protect and promote the precious and unique interests, values and culture of the civilization commonly held by the West". This clearly reflects what Mr. Huntington wants. But if Western countries do this, imposing the values and interests of the Western civilization on other countries, the result will not help pro-

mote the proper development of international order and relations, but on the contrary will make things worse.

There are over 200 countries in the world with many different peoples. All have their own cultural tradition and features. This is the reason why our world is full of colors and vitality. Any culture or civilization that has lasted till now must have its rationale to exist and develop. In the confluence of the Western civilization and non-Western civilizations, the result of the meeting need not necessarily be a clash. It could be integration and then evolution towards a new and higher level of civilization.

In the history of the development of human civilization there have been many such examples. Having inherited West European civilization, the United States has become the most powerful country in the world. Absorbing the essence of Western civilization, but not necessarily giving up their national and cultural features, Japan, Singapore and South Korea have been developing prosperously. Exchanges among different civilizations could lead to mutual learning and complementarity for common development to a higher level and new integration.

Moreover, different civilizations could seek common ground while reserving differences, and can promote the good while eliminating the bad. If Western civilization could not even cure its own social diseases, it might be the right time for the West to reconsider what should be done, to play down its salvationist posture, to give up the arrogance of seeing itself as the world center. Instead it could seek common ground for different civilizations, learn from the strong points of other civilizations, and enhance a better understanding and respect among different civilizations. That could be very helpful to developing Western civilization itself.

NOTES:

1. See Samuel Huntington, "The West: Unique, Not Universal".

2. James M. Berens, *The American Democracy*, (Chinese version) (China Social Sciences Publishing House, 1993), pp. 1143-1156

3. Huntington.

4. Fukuyama, "The End of History", *National Interest*, Summer 1989

5. In his State Union Address to the 77th Congress on January 6, 1941, American President Roosevelt put forward the famous four freedoms, namely, freedom of speech, freedom of belief, freedom

from fears and freedom from shortage. In August the same year, he and Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, drew up the Atlantic Charter, and by the end of September that year 15 countries had signed the charter.

6. Fukuyama.

7. Huntington.

8. Zhang Hongyi, ed. *American Human Rights and Human Rights Diplomacy* (Beijing: The People's Publishing House, 1993), p. 282.

9. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. III, pp. 334, 336 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1994).

10. See "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993.

11. *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. III, p. 346.