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Civilization Grafting

No Culture is an Island

Liu Binyan

The end of the Cold War has indeed brought about a new phase in world politics, yet its impact is not unidirectional. The tense confrontation between the two armed camps has disappeared and in this sense ideological conflict seems to have come to an end, for the moment. But conflicts of economic and political interests are becoming more and more common among the major nations of the world, and more and more tense. Neither civilization nor culture has become the “fundamental source of conflict in this new world.”

The new world is beginning to resemble the one in which I grew up in the 1930s. Of course, tremendous changes have taken place; nonetheless there are increasing similarities. Western capitalism has changed greatly, but the current global recession is in many ways similar to the Great Depression. The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany may no longer exist, but the economic, social and political factors that led to their emergence still do—economic dislocation, xenophobia and populism.

The Cold War has ended, but hot wars rage in more than thirty countries and regions. The wave of immigrants from poor territories to rich countries and the influx of people from rural areas to cities have reached an unprecedented scale, forming what the U.N. Population Fund has called the “current crisis of mankind.” We can hardly say these phenomena result from conflict between different civilizations.

CHINA'S ERRANT EXPERIMENT

For most countries the task is not to demarcate civilizations but to mix and meld them. In the former colonial countries, the problems of poverty and starvation have never been solved by their own civilizations or by the interaction of their indigenous civilization with Western civilization. But this search for a successful formula for economic well-being and political freedom continues.

Look at China. The Chinese people eagerly embraced Communism in the

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pursuit of economic development and political dignity. The bankruptcy of Maoism and socialism occurred a dozen years before the collapse of the former Soviet Union. It was not the result of the end of the Cold War, but the disaster brought about by Maoist ideology. The reason for this shift again comes from the strong desire of the people to get rid of poverty and to gain freedom. For China this is the third time people have tried to graft Western civilization onto traditional civilization—in the first half of the twentieth century and in the 1980s, with capitalism; from the late 1940s to the 1970s, with Marxism-Leninism.

Now, though Confucianism is gradually coming back to China, it cannot be compared to the increasingly forceful influence of Western culture on the Chinese people in the last twenty years. The Chinese people are a practical sort; they have always been concerned about their material well-being. In addition, the last forty years have left them wary of intangible philosophies, gods and ideals. Nowhere in China is there a group or political faction that could be likened to the extreme nationalists of Russia or Europe.

Nor can we expect any civilizational unity that will bring the Confucian world together. In the past forty years, the split of mainland China with Taiwan was of course due to political and ideological differences. After the end of the Cold War the Confucianist culture common to the Chinese from both sides of the Taiwan Strait will not overcome the differences in political systems, ideology and economic development.

Deng Xiaoping's experiment is to try

to weld Western capitalism with Marxism-Leninism and even aspects of Confucianism. Thus while liberalizing the economy, the Chinese communist regime also points to the consumerism and hedonism of Western civilization in an effort to resist the influences of democracy and freedom. At the same time, it borrows from Confucianist thought—obedience to superiors, etc.—which is useful in stabilizing communist rule. It also attempts to use Chinese nationalist sentiments in place of a bankrupt ideology, seeking to postpone its inevitable collapse.

There are many historical and current examples of rulers who have a greater interest in maintaining or developing some kind of traditional order rather than in accommodating the struggles and changing interests of ordinary people. In the mid-1930s, Chang Kai-shek launched a national campaign advocating Confucianism—called “The Movement of New Life”—when China's population was victimized by famine, civil war and Japanese aggression. The movement aimed to distract people from their real interests and ended in complete failure. Since the 1980s China's new rulers began a campaign similar to the KMT's—“The Movement for Higher Spiritual Civilization”—which advocated love for the country and the party, and behaving civilly toward others. But the actual aim of the campaign was to replace the bankrupt ideology and to distract the public from its interest in democracy and freedom, and to blunt the cultural and moral impact of the West. Understandably, it failed. Even the terminology of a “spiritual civilization” became the target of

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irony and ridicule among the Chinese.

What will emerge in China is a mixture of these many forces, but it will not be the kind of mixture that this regime wants. It will not mix economic freedom with political unfreedom. Communism and capitalism are so completely different that no one will be fooled for long that they can be joined. In the end there will be a Chinese path, but it will be a different path to freedom, a different path to democracy. The Chinese people do not speak in Western phrases and political philosophies, but they know what kind of political and economic system best serves their own welfare.

human spirit is indeed the longer and harder task. It will require using the best of all civilizations, not emphasizing the differences between them. ㊦

TAKING THE BEST FROM EACH

It is ironic that Samuel P. Huntington sees a resurgent Confucianism at the very time when spiritual deterioration and moral degradation are eroding China's cultural foundation. Forty-seven years of communist rule have destroyed religion, education, the rule of law, and morality. Today this dehumanization caused by the despotism, absolute poverty and ascetism of the Mao era is evidenced in the rampant lust for power, money and carnal pleasures among many Chinese.

Coping with this moral and spiritual vacuum is a problem not just for China but for all civilizations. Will the 21st century be an era when, through interaction and consensus, civilizations can merge, thus helping peoples to break old cycles of dehumanization? Getting rid of poverty and slavery is the least of China's problems. The more difficult task is the process of men's self-salvation, that is, transforming underlings and cowed peoples into human beings. Enriching the