

Core Socialist Values • Keywords

Chief Editor: Han Zhen

Civilization

Li Xiaodong

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Civilization
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Civilization

Chapter One

Back to the Origin of Civilization

1

**Back to the Origin of Civiliza-
tion**

Civilization is an important sign of social progress and an important feature of a modern socialist country as well. It is often heard that China is a civilized ancient country with a history of over 5,000 years. It was also proposed to actively foster the core socialist values at the 18th CPC National Congress, where “civilization” was made an important part of the core socialist values. What’s civilization then? What’s the great significance of civilization to a country? With what do we build a civilized China? How should we build a civilized China? ... Now, let’s seek answers to these questions one by one.

1. Essential features of civilization

Before elaborating on the essential features of “civilization” as an important content of the core socialist values, there is a premise question to be answered—what’s civilization? Civilization can be understood from two aspects, one being the evolution of academic studies; and the other being the habit of use in everyday life.

(1) From the perspective of academic studies

From the perspective of academic studies, to clear up the conception of civilization, we have to mention another conception that’s closely related to civilization, that is, culture.

From the Chinese etymology, “文化” (culture) has the meanings of “人文化成” (to make a man in the real sense by acquiring and mastering culture) and “以文化人” (to influence others by reasoning). According to the *Book of Changes*, That is, there are men and women in this world, and men are tough and women are soft. It is natural for a man and a woman to come together. It is cultural that a

man and a woman come together to make a family, and then many families to make a country. Nature and culture are relative. The ruler of the country must observe the rules of the nature to clear up the sequence of farming, fishing and hunting, while controlling the order of human relations in the real society and clear up the hierarchical relationships between the ruler and the courtiers, the father and the son, the husband and the wife and among friends so that people could act in a polite and civilized way. In so doing, the whole country can be civilized. According to this understanding, everything relating to “men” between “nature” and “human” can be called culture.

Due to different understandings of the relationship between men and nature, researchers have different definitions on the scope of culture. That's where we get the so-called “big culture” or “small culture”. The “big culture” views everything relating to men—including spiritual creation and material products—within the scope of culture; while “small culture” only takes spiritual things as culture.

Civilization can be properly expressed in the comparison with culture. In most cases, it is difficult to tell the differences between culture and civilization, because many scholars think they're the same thing when explaining them. So we can only describe the differences between the two through their subtly-different uses. We may put it this simple way: all things of civilization fall into the category of culture, but not all things of culture can be called civilization.

For example, in his famous book *Ancient Society*, Morgan the famous American anthropologist and ethnologist developed the theory of three stages of human progress, i. e. , from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization, which was spoken highly of by Engels.

The savagery era commenced with the infancy period of human beings and ended at the use of pottery. It was divided into three sub-

periods, namely the *Older*, the *Middle* and the *Upper* statuses of savagery. The *Older* status of savagery ended with the acquisition of a fish subsistence and of a knowledge of using fire. Humans subsisted upon wild plants. The commencement of articulate speech belonged to this period. The *Middle* status of savagery ended with the invention of the bow and arrow. The *Upper* status of savagery ended with the invention of the art of pottery.

The era of barbarism was basically about the growth, development and the great prosperity of the primitive clan society. It was divided into three statuses, too, namely the *Lower*, the *Middle* and the *Upper* statuses. The *Lower* status of barbarism referred to the New Stone Age; the *Middle* status of barbarism belonged to the Bronze Age, while the *Upper* status of barbarism belonged to the Iron Age. The era of barbarism was when men learned how to domesticate animals and farm, and when the production of natural products was increased through human activities as well. Men were able to grind fine stone tools, introduced ceramics, and learned the refining of metals. They began a nomadic life and large-scale field farming. The private ownership got further developed, and it transited to the class society.

While his own comments on the era of civilization were, "Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense; its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects, as well as the obligations and the limits of the

rights of its owners. The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relations. A mere property career is not, the final destiny of mankind, if progress is to be the law of the future as it has been of the past. The time which has passed away since civilization began is but a fragment of the past duration of man's existence; and but a fragment of the ages yet to come. The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes."

As far as this case is concerned, both the era of savagery and that of barbarism were stages of human culture, which did not reach the stage of "civilization". That's why they were called "culture" instead of "civilization".

Culture and civilization were used very differently by later researchers.

In his book *Decline of the West*, Spengler, the famous history philosopher, brought forth the view that the development of the human society was a culture experiencing its childhood, youth, middle age and senior years, and that the life of a culture would be over when such culture became civilization. He cited some examples where several cultures became civilization to indicate that a culture would lose its innovative vitality till the stage of civilization.

It is interesting that Toynbee, a British history philosopher who viewed Spengler as his idol, mixed culture with civilization, and held

that the world progressed and developed only because different civilizations challenged and took challenges. To him, human societies since ancient times were all faced with challenges from outside. If some creative elites from inside could have proper responses to the stimulation and challenges of the external environment, even respond by changing the institutions they lived in; and suppose such challenges were not too heavy or overloaded (because a far too huge challenge may destroy a society), nor were they too small to be ignored (because minor challenges could not simulate enough impetus inside), and a few number of creative groups could be stimulated to make a response, the society would reach the civilization status.

From the above views, we can see the complexity of understanding culture and civilization. Seen from the course of history, the benevolent see benevolence and the wise see wisdom.

(2) Civilization from the angle of the habit of use in daily life

In everyday life, civilization has very complicated meanings. Specifically speaking, it may mean:

First, the stage of cultural development based on a certain period or area, like the Western civilization, the Arabic civilization, and the Eastern civilization. In this sense, civilization is a conception with rich contents, and is almost the cultural connotation of culture during the period or in the area concerned. Such expression is very close to the angle of academic studies mentioned above. When using it, we more or less mean some form of cultures having already reached the civilization status.

Second, the status of human culture relative to savagery and barbarism, like what people mean by "bidding farewell to savagery and barbarism, and welcoming the dawn of civilization", or "working

hard to build a civilized city". Civilization in such sense does not indicate the overall meaning of culture mentioned in the above paragraph, but is to express an advanced property that meets the development requirements of the era. The difference between a civilized city and an uncivilized city is not geographical, but lies in the degree to which civilization is exhibited.

Third, behavioral habits of an individual; when someone is able to handle interpersonal relationships and participates in social interactions in a polite and sensible way in everyday life, then it could be viewed as a good behavioral habit. In such sense, it may be civilized language (like it goes in Chinese, “良言一句三冬暖”, meaning “a kind word is remembered for a long time, but an abusive language hurts the feelings at once”) or a civilized behavior (like obeying the traffic signals to cross the street and queuing up).

In many cases, people do not distinguish between the aforesaid three different meanings of “civilization”, because they are sometimes overlapped or mutually supplementary. That remind people to clear up the main points they are to express when using the word “civilization”.

2. The values and role of civilization

As the deposits and accumulation of historical development, civilization is of very significant social value which, generally speaking, is demonstrated in the following aspects:

(1) Civilization is the symbol of the development degree of a country or a region

To understand a country's development status, we think the

country's civilization performance to be a very important factor and standard of observation. It is usually demonstrated by such elements as the concept of family, tools, language, text, belief, religious concepts, laws, city-state and country. To get to know the development status of a certain country or region, it is a must to observe the era of such country or region and its development status in such era from the angle of cultural forms. The difference between the so-called ancient countries and modern countries lies not in the times of their emergence, but embodies the development degree of culture. Some researchers use production tools to differentiate the development of countries or regions. The feature is used to differentiate the Stone Age and the Bronze Age.

The criteria for the emergence of civilization are mainly the appearance of cities, the introduction of text and the establishment of national institutions. The most important precondition is the appearance of cities. It is safe to say that cities are the place of origin of civilization. The oldest civilization in human history appeared 4500 BC in the ancient Egyptian state along the Nile River. With the development and progress of the human society, it became increasingly possible for people to ameliorate the conditions of civilization. Cities became more improved in such change.

Related link

Ancient City of Pompeii

At the bordering of Campania, a fertile small plain in Italy, and near the estuary of the Sarno River (known in ancient times as the Sarnus) sat the ancient city of Pompeii which was built in the 8th century BC, and seized and controlled by the Samnites since the 5th century BC. During the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, after three battles between the Romans

and the Samnites, Pompeii became a part of the Roman Empire and then a typical city for the Roman people. Although it covered an area of only 1.8 square kilometers, it reflected a very typical regional culture. Around the city, there were walls of bricks and stones 4,800 meters in length. Besides, Pompeii had 8 magnificent city gates. In the ancient city of Pompeii, there were streets and lanes paved with stones, straight roads, 2-floor rectangular buildings with ponds having finely decorated statues in front, comfortable bathrooms for the use of the slave owners, an arena to accommodate 20,000 audiences, and a stadium. The ancient city of Pompeii reflects the spectacular economic and cultural development of the Roman slavery back then. The discovery of the ancient city of Pompeii left a museum of history for people to research Ancient Rome. In AD 63, a violent earthquake ravaged Pompeii, but it was rebuilt soon. The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 buried Pompeii under the volcanic ashes overnight. In 1599, the ruins of Pompeii were brought to the light of day once again. In 1748, Pompeii was rediscovered, too, and became a solidified sign of culture for people to explore its secrets.

(2) Civilization is a centralized expression of social morale

When we enter a social organization, we would firstly focus on some morale things. For example, in a factory, we would notice its plants and other facilities, but we may pay more attention to the overall morale, the interpersonal relationships among the employees there. An enterprising social organization does far better than one that has intense interpersonal relationships and less-than-satisfying performance of civilization. Sometimes, many people prefer an employer where they may not be well paid, but would work in harmony

than an employer where they are well paid, but would work amidst highly-intensive interpersonal relationships. That is a choice made on social morale.

As the “barometer” of morale, civilization can be demonstrated at different levels. Local customs, practices and habits let us feel the overall morale of a community. Politeness and courtesy allow people to feel the degree of civilization of a family or a class. The awareness of queuing up, and the obedience to the traffic rules and the rule of “one-meter line” are measures of civilization, and give people a direct and vivid impression of social civilization.

Related link

The one-meter line is also the civilization line

Today, in front of the business windows of most banks, there is the one-meter line which aims to keep a public instance and protect privacy. But sometimes, the one-meter line, or an indication of civilization, is just a sham. Sometimes, many people would stand within the one-meter line, making the person in operation feel unsafe. People say that the one-meter line in banks is a “civilization line” or a “moral line” in social activities. In normal social activities, citizens should respect one another and leave some private space for the others. Some citizens do not treat the one-meter line seriously because they are too unconscious to protect privacy and have not realized the significance of the one-meter line. The one-meter line is not only a rule and distance, but also a security barrier for people. Despite the distance, people trust and respect one another more. There is also an opinion that bank staff should take effective measures to keep the order in the bank lobby, protect each client’s privacy, and make all clients feel safe. Only in so doing can the one-meter line truly play its role.