

TOWARDS A COMMON CIVILIZATION: G. LOWES DICKINSON, CHINA, AND GLOBAL HUMANISM

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The older I get the more convinced I become that for us the most important and real thing is the passion to develop a higher, more extensive life; and that that passion is just an ultimate fact to be accepted and acted on.

G. Lowes Dickinson (*Autobiography* 182)

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter Benjamin (256)

Interest in civilizational studies is often stimulated by the experience of major social crisis; comparative civilizational theory flourishes when civilizations clash, or are in the danger of clash. At moments of radical historical transformation, geo-cultural units, considered to be civilizational formations, are compared and contrasted in response to contemporary socio-political problems. The origin of Toynbee's *Study of History*, for example, lies in the author's attempt to understand the catastrophic consequences of WWI in terms of a geo-historical other. Reading Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, he was struck by the similarities between the two wars. "Two societies could be spaced wide apart chronologically and yet be mentally contemporaneous," and with time banished as a factor from the life of a society, Toynbee believed that human mind could compare and contrast societies and deduce a set of scientifically valid generalizations about man's experience in the universe (Mehta 121). His multi-volume *Study of History* (1934-1961) is the result of a sustained effort to compare societies and civilizations in order to understand the pattern of civilizational development. To compare the present and here with the distanced and there was to be a major mode of enquiry and understanding of world history.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, for such progressive Cambridge intellectuals as G. Lowes Dickinson and Bertrand Russell, it was more than an intellectual enterprise to understand civilizational diversities.¹ They shared the intellectual impulse to uncover the logic of universal history and civilizational progress. It's their vision of a common humanity that brought them to China for an alternative model of development. Russell's visit to China is better known, more extensively reported and widely referenced.² He came to China on a lecture tour which lasted for about nine months between October 1920 and July 1921. Mao Zedong was said to be among his audience, though Mao was not impressed with Russell's analysis of Chinese civilization. Seven years prior to Russell's visit, Dickinson had visited China for the same purpose. In the early twentieth century, the wheels of the Industrial Revolution had carried Europe further down the road where its golden past was irrecoverably lost. In an attempt to recover from the shock of the devastating human consequences of industrial modernity, Dickinson looked beyond Europe and came to China for an answer to the insurmountable difficulties that the West encountered at the *fin de siècle*. China offered an attractive model of civilizational development and fresh possibilities of a civilizational future. But it was WWI that permanently changed Dickinson: "Out of the wreckage of his shattered hopes and aspirations, he pieced together a new self, which stood forth as a flaming crusader for peace" (Harrod 64). Since the war, the theme of his life would have been pacifism; his humanism would be an international practice that aimed at promoting the understanding of world civilizations for international peace and justice.

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For Russell and Dickinson, culture and civilization are two concepts that are interchangeable, overlapping, and conflated. And consideration of civilizational development of the human species is not a matter of giving civilization a neat dictionary-type definition that seeks to sort out its etymological and semantic complexities. Dickinson and Russell were public intellectuals, committed to the actualities of the present: its problems and its promises, and determined to explore all the possibilities of overcoming the forces that created and sustained international inequalities; their understanding of the human species' future and destiny, which was tested and acted out in their active participation in practical work on global justice and peace, articulates what I would call a global humanism, which must be willing to treat all civilizations equally and to submit to a critical scrutiny one's own whose defects and flaws should be made manifest, understood, and amended.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Dickinson travelled to China in 1912, on a fellowship established by Albert Kahn, a French Jew, who believed that "acquaintance with other countries may enlarge mutual appreciation and contribute to peace" (Dickinson, *Autobiography* 177). In Shanghai, Dickinson met and interviewed Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, who had stepped down

from the presidency of the Republic of China in early 1912. However, “being unaccustomed to interviewing people and reluctant to intrude, I didn’t make much out of him” (Dickinson, *Autobiography* 182). In China Dickinson is occasionally mentioned as a marginal English academic in reference to the poet Xu Zhimo. Xu left the US in the autumn of 1920 for England. He first studied at the LSE in London and with Dickinson’s help was transferred to King’s College, Cambridge. In this collective literary memory, Dickinson has served as no more than a footnote to Xu Zhimo, and his role was at most an academic facilitator. This is a sad reminder of how academic fame can be so fortuitous. In his time, however, Dickinson’s reputation ran so high that it was believed that he “would easily beat Pater and Gobineau, and even creep up towards Voltaire and Mr Bernard Shaw” (Forster viii). He was a prolific author, on a wide range of topics: Greek civilization, religion, politics, and international relations, which are often examined through the lens of a historical past or from a comparative perspective; his major works include *The Greek View of Life* (1896), *The Meaning of Good: A Dialogue* (1901), *Letters from John Chinaman* (1901), *A Modern Symposium* (1905), *Justice and Liberty* (1908) *Civilizations of India, China and Japan* (1914), and *The Choice before Us* (1917).³

Nearly all of Dickinson’s books “are concerned with the immediate issues of his time, political, religious, educational or what-have-you”; this is, W.H. Auden explains, why Dickinson is hardly read today (viii).⁴ Modern Europe was a history of conflicts and wars, of destructions and deaths. Dickinson “had studied English Civil War and the French Revolution and the contemporary Boer War and the disintegration of China.” Soon after his return from China in 1913, Europe was to be plunged once again into the massive act of self-destruction: “One of the evil things about war is that it provokes a sort of competition in grief” (Forster 129-30). Dickinson would never be able to fully recover from the shock and horror of man’s own brutality and cruelty manifested in the carnage of the Great War. Dickinson was concerned with the future of human civilization, which for him was at a critical juncture at the beginning of the twentieth century. A century apart now, issues close to his heart, such as global equality and justice, the civilizational future of the human species, management of a regulated and governed structure of international relations, are not, as Auden has suggested, superannuated, but they grow even more difficult and complicated and require more organized collective efforts to deal with. Dickinson’s global humanism, as articulated in his writing and embodied in his practice, must be renewed, adopted, and practiced. To revisit him is not just to exonerate a forgotten ghost, but to remember a form of historical understanding of global order and to reinstate the memories of some of the earlier efforts to understand, influence, and alter man’s civilizational destiny.

Dickinson was a Hellenist and had no special training in Chinese culture. But because he was not confined to one particular field of enquiry, Dickinson was able to conduct comparative analysis of major world civilizations in such a way that it would yield interesting conclusions. One of the oldest civilizations in the world, China has

sustained a remarkable geo-cultural unity and spatio-temporal continuity, and it is a necessary point of comparison for the development of a cosmopolitan vision of humanity. As far as Dickinson is concerned, China is not radically different from, or irreconcilable with, Western civilization. He excludes China from the East as a geo-cultural and civilizational space: "The East must be confined to India, and China included in the West" (*Appearances* 59). China was "a civilization with which he fell in love" (Auden viii). His affection for China might grow into a narcissistic orientalism. He once opened his speech on civilizational comparison thus: "I am speaking to you about China, not because I know anything about the subject not because I once visited the country, but because, in a previous existence, I actually was a Chinaman!" (Forster 117-18). His love for China could compromise his analysis and judgment, but his commitment to a new global order remains a vital source of cosmopolitan humanism. What he wrote and practiced, Forster says, "did not merely increase our experience: he left us more alert for what has not yet been experienced and more hopeful about other men because he had lived" (Forster vii-viii).

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Dickinson's intellectual affair with China began formally with *Letters from John Chinaman* (1901; hereafter cited as *Letters*; its US edition is *Letters from a Chinese Official*). He was writing at a time when rampant imperialism defined the dominant Western view on human progress and civilizational telos. Responsible for many of the international conflicts and wars, imperialism contributed to, and was produced by, modern industrial civilization. European comparative civilizational analysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often offered to defend the practice of European imperialism, including that of cultural imperialism; international conflicts in the age of imperialism were presented as those between local and global formations. Dickinson believed, however, that imperialist wars were not the result of local resistance to imperialism's "civilizing missions." At the time Dickinson wrote the book, China had just got over the Boxer Rebellion. *Letters* intended to reverse European hostilities to China, by questioning some of its foundational assumptions about China as its cultural/civilizational other.

Letters opens with this observation about the Boxer Rebellion as an example of civilizational conflicts: "Recent events in China have brought into new prominence at once the fundamental antagonism between the Eastern and Western civilization" (*Letters* 3). European barbarism displayed in the bloody suppression of the Boxers shows how the imperialist notion of civilizational progress as embodied by the British Empire is radically flawed. Global violence unleashed by imperialism, either through armed destruction in battle or imperialist plunder, is a logical development of modern industrial civilization. While memories of the looting of the Yuan Ming Yuan during the Second Opium War were still fresh in 1900, Beijing was plundered again, and this time not just the imperial palaces and residences of the Qing aristocrats, but also wealthy private homes were ransacked for precious objects.⁵ In this carnival of lawless looting, soldiers were turned into savages; an inordinate number of Chinese artifacts found their way into the national museums of those countries

which participated in the suppression of the Boxers and invasion of China. Such barbarism is only a necessary manifestation of predatory imperialism, which is part and extension of European modern industrial civilization. In the voice of John Chinaman, Dickinson speaks forcefully against Europe's understanding of its "civilizing mission": "You have compelled us, against our will, to open our ports to your trade; you have forced us to permit the introduction of a drug which we believe is ruining our people; you have exempted your subjects residing among us from the operation of our laws.... And yet all this time you have posed as civilized peoples dealing with barbarians" (*Letters* 60).

160 *Letters* is Dickinson's response to the debate on models of civilizational development. It adopts the genre and tradition in which early critical reflections on such issues as modernity and tradition, freedom and equality, imperialism and global justice constitute a discursive part of the narrative of the European Enlightenment. The phenomenal popularity of Chinese objects and their Western counterparts of *chinoiserie* facilitated the emergence and development of a cosmopolitan epistolary style, an early form of what Goethe would call *Weltliteratur* in the early nineteenth century (see Eckerman 165-66). Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* is an example of this cosmopolitan literary style; it inspired a whole group of writings in this form in the eighteenth century, including Horace Walpole's *A Letter from Xo Ho* and Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* in Britain.⁶ The pseudo-oriental traveller, who has travelled a long distance to Europe for experience and understanding of a different civilization, acts as social observer and commentator. Landing on the foreign soil of Europe, he is shocked at the radical differences between Western and Eastern civilizations and begins to reflect on how such civilizational differences should be comprehended. In letters home reporting what he has seen, the oriental traveller is inclined to turn his accounts of Europe into a series of critical comments and reflections on aspects of industrialization and its human and social consequences. It was a popular genre, a literary novelty, and an example of aesthetic cosmopolitanism that began to develop the eighteenth century. It fell into oblivion in the nineteenth century, only to be rescued, revived and popularized by Dickinson with his *Letters*, which, in form and content, continues with the eighteenth-century convention of epistolary travel writing. Travel writing or pseudo-travel writing, especially by a fictional oriental traveller, would be a convenient and effective formal instrument or mode of comparison.

Letters is an extended essay that brings to public attention the purpose of comparative civilization in facilitating critical analysis of industrial modernity and its human consequences that Europe began to understand at the *fin de siècle*. The comparison between China and the West has a particular attraction, not just because China presents a different model of civilizational development from that of modern Europe. Since Lord Macartney's failed mission in 1793, China had been seen as a civilization that had entered a static stage and grown senile. In much of the nineteenth century, Chinese civilization was widely considered corrupt and well past

beyond its peak, especially after the two Sino-British wars in 1839-42 and 1856-80. Civilizational progress and degeneration at different periods of time and in various parts of the world, the elements which distinguished one civilization from another, and the symptoms which bespeak its decline, are some of the questions Dickinson is concerned with. For him, civilization is not a homogeneous formation, but rather a heterogeneous one. Our task should not be to determine whether civilization is universal or national, but to describe its local articulations, specific manifestations, and concrete representations. To argue for or against the existence of a universal civilization would not lead to an understanding of how the present conditions of local civilizational formations are defined and constituted.

Dickinson was well-versed in the discourse on comparative civilization. There are two sources of his thinking about civilizational differences, one intellectual: his training in Greek culture, and the other political: his commitment to international justice. By training and profession, he was a classicist specializing in Greek philosophy, but ironically, as Forster tells us, it was only when he studied contemporary affairs that he began to discover and fully appreciate what the classics meant. Many of the modern problems have already been discussed by the Greeks in remarkable depth and with unparalleled clarity. He discovered to his joy that “the ancients are modern” and “Athens had expressed our problems with a lucidity beyond our power.” “Greek literature combined beauty and depth, wisdom and wit, gaiety and insight” (Forster 213). He had read Edward Gibbon, whose *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* fascinated him. Gibbon wrote this history in order to remember lessons from the past, and to discover the secret rules of historical development which might teach us how to prevent the decline and fall of a great empire and thus to sustain the species’ civilizational progress. We continue to read Gibbon, because of his “boldness in composing an account of more than a thousand years of history” which “made him a pioneer in the comparative treatment of Rome, Byzantium, the early Church, and Islam” (Bowersock 4). In the river of history the rise and fall of a great civilization is not just a historical puzzle that teases the intellect but of immediate relevance to contemporary social life and global relations. The study of human historical and civilizational telos has been one of the most prominent philosophical themes for thinkers and authors ranging from Montesquieu to George Eliot, from Hegel to Darwin, who, in their diverse ways and idioms, reviewed civilizational development and speculated on its future possibilities. To unravel the mystery of human history was an intellectual vocation for some of the committed thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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HUMAN PROGRESS: CULTURAL OR CIVILIZATIONAL ADVANCEMENT?

Culture and *civilization* have long been used interchangeably. However, even

when they are used synonymously, they have different emphases and orientations. Etymologically, culture is an agricultural metaphor to refer to the need and desire for human cultivation, especially mental cultivation, while civilization is about being externally civilized and developed. It is important to keep in mind the historical use of culture as a verbal noun, singular, non-countable, indicating semantically that culture was not nationally or locally divided and categorized. Historically, culture is not an indigenous or national act of development but a general human practice of self-development towards a cultured state of being. It was Herder who decided to nationalize the concept and to turn it into a countable noun: "No two leaves of any one tree in nature," Herder says, "are to be found perfectly alike; and still less do two human faces, or human frames, resemble each other" (3). Historically, therefore, culture as national and local is a romantic invention. But Herder's idea of culture or national culture is one that presupposes a cultural universality that encompasses and organizes local differentiations and diversities within the planetary order, a familiar romantic idea of "multiplicity in unity" that is celebrated by a whole group of European thinkers and writers from Coleridge to Hegel.

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Compared with the internal division of culture, the divergence between culture and civilization is far more significant and consequential. As Raymond Williams shows, in the course of the nineteenth century, culture started to *react* to civilization and struggled to remain distinct in the course of the Industrial Revolution. Development in the realm of material productivity, especially in science and technology, was increasingly understood as civilizational, rather than cultural, achievement. In this historical process, civilization was gradually seen as "superficial, artificial, external", as embodied in such desired properties as politeness and luxury; in contrast culture as a process of "inner" or "spiritual" development was associated with religion, art, the family and personal life—individual life as opposed to social and collective life. From Rousseau onwards, through the Romantic movement, "there was the attack on 'civilization' as superficial, an 'artificial' as distinct from a 'natural' state; a cultivation of 'external' properties—politeness and luxury—as against more 'human' needs and impulses" (Williams 14).

A more important historical cause of the separation between civilization and culture is the continuing secularization and liberalization that began to put pressure on the concept of civilization. On the one hand, Williams says, "the rapid development of industrial society and its prolonged social and political conflicts" were "part of the continuing development of civilization: a new and higher social order," but on the other these developments threatened to destroy civilization as "the achieved state." This semantic ambiguity of civilization mirrors its political and ideological contradiction: it denotes both "enlightened and progressive development" and "an achieved and threatened state," "becoming increasingly retrospective and often in practice identified with the received glories of the past" (Williams 14).

Matthew Arnold's call for the constitution of the foundation of humanity must be seen as a critical response to the expansion and domination of industrial civilization.

In some sense, his formulation of culture as the best that has been thought and said is already a rejection of modern industrial civilization. Well before Edward Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), Arnold had been using culture consistently not as a local and specific human action, but as one that defined the modern understanding of humanity.⁷ For Arnold, the category of "literature" should embrace not mere belles-lettres, but all great classics including Newton's *Principia* and Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (see Collini). This is how Arnold defined culture as the best that had been thought and said and why he considered culture to be crucial for the understanding and renewal of humanity. His advocacy of culture as the new religion of humanity must be taken into account in any serious consideration of the historical meaning of culture as divergent from civilization.

Culture is thus quickly idealized, first as the inner process of human development with its related social activities, and then as the whole social process in which human beings define and shape the way they live. It is even equated with the totality of human history; to study culture is to study the history of how human beings understand what they have made by themselves, as history and as society, and is to acknowledge the historical significance of the development of human consciousness. Understood as human effort and practice to cultivate the self—the inner self, culture is equated with the inner history of human progress. "This history," Erich Auerbach asserts, "contains man's mighty, adventurous advance to a consciousness of his human condition and to the realization of his given potential" (5). Culture, thus idealized, is no less universal than civilization in its most material and historical manifestations.

Therefore, the distinction between civilization and culture, if there is one at all, is not so much one between the former as global or larger and the latter as local or smaller, as one between outer and inner development, external and internal progress, between material-technological development and intellectual-mental progress. This historical divergence was deepened by their semantic and etymological differences that continue to be used in interpretation of civilization as universal, material, and techno-scientific, and culture as non-material, local, and national.⁸ The distinction is made and understood in terms of the means or instrument through which they each achieve progress and success in diverse geo-locations and historical periods. The tools and instruments of civilizational development such as new technologies and scientific innovations are not geo-politically specific and may be adopted and applied universally beyond national boundaries, but the tools of culture are usually nationally and geo-culturally defined, especially language which is the most important means by which we gain access to the human past. However, as both culture and civilization "carried the problematic double sense of an achieved state and of an achieved state of development" (Williams 14) and because history is "inaccessible to us except in textual form... and can be approached only by way of prior (re-) textualization" (Jameson 82), civilizational achievement as history needs to be comprehended through culture, and any distinction made between them is less real than

it might appear.

Paul Ricoeur claimed in 1961 that “mankind as a whole is on the brink of a single world civilization representing at once gigantic progress for everyone and an overwhelming task of survival and adapting our cultural heritage to this new setting” (271). He was positive and certain about this universal civilization which he believed had already emerged. However, Ricoeur became vague and ineffective in his account of this singular human civilization when he was compelled to describe and define it. Now half a century from the time Ricoeur made that claim, mankind has not yet crossed that brink, even though the world is further flattened in the process of globalization.

164 If there is only one universal civilization, there is only one universal culture that should be understood as collective efforts for self-improvement as civilization does. The renewed interest in the problem of civilization today is partly attributable to Samuel Huntington’s proposition about the coming clash of civilizations following the end of the cold war, which, it should be noted, presupposes civilizational diversities as the condition of international politics. Huntington’s notion of civilization is “a cultural entity,” “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of identity people have” (“Clash” 23-24). It can’t be defined or understood in separation from culture, and civilizational development is determined by culture.⁹ In every living culture there is civilization, and vice versa. The point is not about whether civilization is universal, not about, that is, whether such a new technological innovation as the computer is more efficient than the typewriter in general, but about how computer technology may be adopted, accepted, and developed in divergent national and cultural locations. Civilization, thus considered, would collapse into culture; it needs to be cultured, so to speak, in order for it to be of instrumental value. The question about the difference between the two implies a methodological rigidity in defining each of them precisely as ontologically separate categories. Historically, civilization and culture are considered in close relation to each other, as the two sides of the same coin that is the development of humanity. It is impossible to use such terms as *culture* and *civilization* precisely as anthropological concepts that describe, define, and explain historical and social formations, not only because of the immense complexities of the ideas used and developed through time, but because of changing diversities of the geo-social units they describe. Culture and civilization are historical concepts, and as such they should be discussed in reference to the social and political debates which have accompanied their usage. The difference between them is a heuristic question that must lead to, and end in, such historical analysis.

TOWARDS A NEW DEFINITION OF CIVILIZATION

Dickinson understands civilization and culture as synonymous; he uses civilization as culture and culture as civilization, depending on what he wishes them to refer

to. When he does make a distinction between them, it's more a technical one for formal categorization or analysis. Chinese civilization in his comparative civilizational analysis is the totality of the nation's achievement, encompassing all aspects of Chinese life, historical, material, or non-material, which are identified and acknowledged as Chinese, including some of those which are traditionally considered to be cultural ones, such as religion, philosophy, and morality. Literature and art are considered part of Chinese civilization that is distinct from Western civilization. In a less technical and imprecise usage of civilization, the term is taken more as a description of external manners:

The more I see and hear of the Chinese, the more delightful they appear to me. It's not a paradox to say that they are the most *civilized* of nations. The west perhaps has more possibilities; but in the region of manners, feelings, and art, I think they have a higher achievement. Only, their *civilization* is decadent—I don't know when nor why it began to decline and nobody seems to know. (Dickinson, *Autobiography* 184; my italics)

It is in such orientalist terms that he undertakes his analysis of their differences. He compares Indian and Chinese civilizations thus: 165

China is a land of human beings. India, as it glimmers in a remote past, is supernatural, uncanny, terrifying, sublime, horrible, monotonous, full of mountains and abysses, all heights and depths, and for ever incomprehensible. But China! So gay, friendly, beautiful, sane, Hellenic, choice, human. (Forster 122)

And Western and Japanese civilizations are compared in such sweeping terms:

The Europeans and Americans really do seem to me a kind of dehumanized, decivilized crowd. The Japs attracted me very much.... They are so gay and vital and beautiful (all but their faces). Of course the West is ruining them, as it ruins everything it touches.... I really begin to look with horror on our civilization. (Dickinson, *Autobiography* 186)

In one of the most famous passages in *Letters*, Dickinson thus describes in poetic language Chinese literature—the most accomplished aspect of Chinese civilization:

A rose in a moonlit garden, the shadow of trees on the turf, almond bloom, scent of pine, the wine-cup and the guitar; these and the pathos of life and death, the long embrace, the hand stretched out in vain, the moment that glides for ever away, with its freight of music and light, into the shadow and hush of the haunted past, all that we have, all that eludes us, a bird on the wing, a perfume escaped on the gale, to all these things we are trained to respond, and the response is what we call literature. (*Letters* 33)

In his report on his travels in the East, *An Essay on the Civilizations of India, China and Japan*, Dickinson shows how he was struck by the diversity of civilizational formations and came to the conclusion that “the East is not a unity, as implied in the familiar antithesis of East and West....A Chinese, after all, is not so unlike an Englishman, and a Japanese not so unlike a Frenchman. ... While, however, the East is not a unity, the *modern* West is. Throughout Europe and America there is the same civilization, intellectual and economic; so that, to a philosophic observer, national boundaries there already begin to appear obsolete and irrelevant” (*Essay* 7-8). But he

quickly reminds us that this unity of the West describes only modern Europe whose civilizational unity or uniformity was achieved in the nineteenth century. Precisely because of civilizational disunities and diversities in both temporal and spatial terms, “we shall find our contrast breaking down at every point, unless we confine the term East to India (which is absurd), and mean by the West (as of course, in fact, we do) the West of the last century only” (*Essay* 8).

Though civilization is understood by him to be larger than culture—it subsumes culture under itself, it is not universal, but national. Within the national framework, civilization and culture are a totality. To understand civilization as national allows Dickinson to unify culture and civilization and to correct that historical mistake about their divergence and separation I have discussed above. The separation between culture and civilization is historical, and their divergence itself is symptomatic of a deep resentment towards the historical forces that promote one at the cost of the other. Not to allow analysis of culture and civilization to slip into a technical differentiation, it is crucial to understand why and how they are differentiated and if such differentiation would enable the possibility of a common and desirable civilization.

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Analysis of civilizational development is itself symptomatic of civilizational crisis. Dickinson’s comparative analysis of Western and Chinese civilization was defined by the condition of Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century. He was motivated by the idea of international peace into actual work on a system or institution that would serve to prevent future human acts of self-destruction. In the summer of 1914, on the eve of Britain’s participation in the war, Dickinson contemplated what he would be able to do to contribute to the war:

On that Sunday morning, August 1st 1914, the word ‘war’ was flaming from the newspaper bills. It was a hot sunny day....The perfect weather continued, and the dumb impotent feeling of the gulf between nature, the past, all beautiful true and gracious things and beliefs, and this black horror of inconceivability that nevertheless was true. I had felt nothing like it since my mother’s death; but this was infinitely worse. I was fifty-two; there was no question of enlisting, though I think I should have enlisted if had been younger....I devoted myself, as far as there was any opportunity for such work, to propaganda for a league of nations. (Dickinson, *Autobiography* 189-90)

This is his response to the war—to form a structure and organization of global governance to manage and regulate international affairs. The phrase “League of Nations” might be his coinage. Dickinson began to work piously on the idea of this international institution after the war broke out. In his *The Choice before Us*, published before the end of the war in 1917, Dickinson elaborated on the dangers threatening human civilization and therefore the need to establish what he called a “World-State” (*Choice* 170). He described his vision of the “League of Nations” as “an international agreement to which all *civilized* states should be admitted, to refer to peaceable settlement all disputes that they have failed to settle by diplomacy; the reference to be either, if the disputes are ‘justiciable,’ to an international Tribunal, or, if they are non-justiciable, to a Council of Conciliation” (*Choice* 183; my italics). The “League

of Nations” was an imaginative solution to the international anarchy and an institutional expression of Dickinson’s global humanism, the core principle of which was to promote and protect global peace, justice, and equality. Dickinson’s cosmopolitanism gave him a socialist tendency in politics and ideology. His reflection on civilization and the species’ future were motivated by “a profound discontent with the present social order,” and a central theme of *Letters* is to expose “the lack of an ethical basis in Western civilization” (More 173). Universal history must presuppose the invalidity of national history or at least subsume it under a global purview. Berating contemporary Western civilization, Dickinson offered a vision of common humanity in a new world order that was defined by international peace and institutionally supported by the League of Nations.

Civilizational comparison or comparative civilizational studies, for Dickinson as well as his Cambridge colleague Bertrand Russell,¹⁰ is not just an academic issue, but an intellectual project that served a distinct political purpose and had an important task to perform for the future of humanity as a whole. Dickinson and Russell shared the belief that it would be to the benefits of the human species as a whole to breed a new civilization through closer cross-cultural contacts. Russell parades such civilizational achievements in *The Problem of China* (1922):

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Contacts between different civilizations have often in the past proved to be landmarks in human progress. Greece learned from Egypt, Rome from Greece, the Arabs from the Roman Empire, mediaeval Europe from the Arabs, and Renaissance Europe from the Byzantines. In many of these cases, the pupils proved better than their masters. (*Problem* 185)

Russell’s procedure of comparison involves a dissecting of a civilization into its basic constitutive elements, comparing them with those of a different civilization, analyzing their differences, and finally reaching a set of generalizations, a familiar procedure in which comparison of Western and Chinese civilizations is diagnostic of their problems and flaws which would otherwise be invisible or unclear.¹¹ Contrasting the two civilizations allows Russell to come to the conclusion that ancient Greece and China, though spatially and temporally apart, embody some of the best elements of human civilization: “one finds in China most of what was to be found in Greece, but nothing of the other two elements of our civilization, namely Judaism and science” (*Problem* 192). Russell’s narrative of the civilizational differences between the two is typical of a particular academic procedure and analytical modality that simplifies and de-historicizes the complexities of civilizational development. However, Russell did not treat the issue as one suitable only for classroom discussion; his diagnosis of Western civilization was oriented towards a solution to its problems, which was to incorporate elements from Chinese civilization and thereby alter its composition, for the creation of a new and better Western civilization, an artificial one which would combine the best civilizational qualities of ancient Greece and China.

Dickinson shared Russell’s intellectual agenda for such comparative civilizational studies and his belief in the possibility of modifying, altering, and remaking human

civilization. This process resembled a laboratory analytical procedure in which such comparison would allow for a seemingly scientific understanding of civilizational problems; its objective was to breed a new civilization that would adopt the best elements from the civilizations compared for the production of an ideal type of civilization, which might be assembled in a way similar to the eugenic production of a perfect biological being. It is a project that is profoundly ahistorical, arbitrary, as if civilization could be grafted and imposed. In such comparative studies, what was overseen and neglected by both Dickinson and Russell is that even the most “universal elements” of one civilization, when they were to be incorporated into another, would have to be locally mediated.

EPILOGUE

168 In the early twentieth century, British participation in the discussion of civilizational differences, especially those between the West and China, was compelled by a strong antipathy towards human self-destruction, specifically, the First World War. Dickinson visited China before the war, and Russell came shortly after it. They were drawn to this ancient civilization for new possibilities of human progress and civilizational development, which were badly needed at a time when Europe, wrecked by incessant wars and conflicts, was threatened once again by another world war on an unprecedented scale. Western civilization was seen as seriously sick. Comparative civilizational analysis is symptomatic of a crisis in self-understanding, which might be, in its initial form, a reactive effort to understand what might have gone wrong with the West. WWI seemed to have announced the end of modern industrial civilization in its tendency to reverse and destroy all of its past glories and achievements.¹² It's worth repeating that for both Dickinson and Russell, the issue of civilization was not just an academic one that could be discussed and rendered unambiguous in the classroom. Civilizational progress is a social practice that must be carried through as a global project. Dickinson took it to be his responsibility to explore and locate the possibilities to amend Western civilization by altering its fabric and composition.¹³

Nearly one century later, following the conclusion of the cold war, “the end of history” is only the beginning of new civilizational conflicts. Huntington's proposition of civilizational clashes has reconfirmed the fact that our world is fragmented by the major civilizational units which are prone to clash. Because it is the perceived differences among civilizations that have given rise to conflicts, it is imperative to understand, reconcile, and if possible, resolve those differences and divergences. Admittedly, Dickinson's cosmopolitanism as exhibited and practiced in his comparative civilizational studies is ultimately utopian and even naïve in its imagination of a common civilizational telos of the human species. Even though critical of European imperialism and colonialism, he was incapable of freeing himself from an orientalist reading of China. This is not only because his writings, such as *Letters from John*

Chinaman, were firmly rooted in an orientalist tradition and language, but because the type of humanist internationalism he promoted, practiced, and embodied was defined by the Enlightenment ideology of civilizational progress, which was, as Edward Said has shown, necessarily orientalist. But Dickinson knew too well the ambivalence of civilization: on the one hand it was the hope of development and progress, and on the other civilizational progress was a history of alienation, destruction, and barbarism. For Dickinson as well as for Russell, the whole point about comparing, knowing, and understanding a different civilization like China was to create new possibilities of civilizational development—to fuse the there and past into the here and present. Civilization was, after all, a human and historical formation that could and should be defined and redefined, modified and amended.

The civilizational eugenic project they undertook is marked by a naïve idealism, but its remarkable optimism developed from and enabled by civilizational comparison lends value to such a procedure of thinking about the species' past, present, and future. Of especial significance in their analysis of civilizational development is their view on the inadequacies of modern society and the paradox of human civilization, which Walter Benjamin has eloquently expressed in the statement I have quoted as an epigraph to this essay: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Civilizational progress must be understood as a global project and should be managed and controlled as such. It was this belief in a common human destiny and total commitment to international peace and justice that brought Dickinson to China. One of the problems with Huntington's thesis about civilizational clash lies in his refusal to acknowledge what we are able to do to reduce international hostilities by thinking critically of our civilizational formation in the way Dickinson did in the early twentieth century and to accept as our task his commitment to the development of a global humanism and a corresponding institution for its sustained practice. To write about Dickinson and his work on comparative civilizational studies, therefore, is not just to remember a long-forgotten intellectual figure, but to revive a form of historical understanding of international order and to renew some of the earlier efforts to influence and even alter man's civilizational destiny. In 1901, when they were actively engaged in thinking about the threats and perils of contemporary Europe, Russell wrote to Dickinson: "one must learn to live in the Past, and so to dominate it that it is not a disquieting ghost or a horrible gibbering spectre stalking through the vast bare halls that once were full of life, but a gentle soothing companion, reminding one of the possibility of good things, and rebuking cynicism and cruelty" (Russell, *Autobiography* 179). This is how they considered and used human civilizational past at the dawn of the twentieth century; this is perhaps why we should, a century later, renew their global humanism and their work for a common civilizational future.

NOTES

1. They were associated with the Bloomsbury Group. Other members of the group showed a strong interest in the issue of civilization, in response to international wars or imperialist violence. Clive Bell's *Civilization: An Essay* (1928), dedicated to Virginia Woolf, was the author's extensive exposition of the meaning of "civilization," for which "[s]ince from August 1914 to November 1918 Great Britain and her Allies were fighting" (see Bell 3). Virginia Woolf did not respond to this exposition of civilization, but her husband Leonard Woolf published *Imperialism and Civilization* in the same year. Leonard Woolf was more concerned with "the nature and present position of imperialism" and "the problem of the future relations between Europe, with its Western civilization, and the rest of the world, particularly Asia and Africa" (Woolf 21).
 2. There have been numerous studies of Bertrand Russell's visit to China, including Feng Chongyi's *Luosu yu Zhongguo* (羅素與中國).
 3. His other publications include *From King to King: The Tragedy of the Puritan Revolution* (1891), *Revolution and Reaction in Modern France* (1892), *The Development of Parliament during the Nineteenth Century* (1895), and *Religion: A Criticism and A Forecast* (1905).
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4. Forster says Dickinson "was really in close and constant touch with the problems of his day and a prophet of much that has happened since his death." And again: "Dickinson's war writings date and were intended to date. He was never much tempered to address posterity, and on subjects such as war and peace his sole aim was to form contemporary opinion" (Forster 144).
 5. There are numerous accounts of the looting of Beijing following the Allied forces' entry into Beijing, such as Alfred Waldersee, *A Field Marshal's Memoirs*, and B.L. Putnam Weale, *Indiscreet Letters from Peking: Being the Notes of an Eye-witness ... of the Siege and Sack of a Distressed Capital in 1900*. See also Allen and Hooker.
 6. Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* first appeared under the title "Chinese Letters" in *Public Ledger* on January 24, 1760, and he wrote 123 letters in the next two years, which were collected in a single volume published in 1762.
 7. Edward Tylor uses culture and civilization as synonyms and even confusingly. *Primitive Culture* opens with this pedestrian statement on civilization: "Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind...is a subject apt for study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes: while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future" (Tylor 1.1).
 8. The distinction between civilization as material and culture as non-material is problematic. For Williams, culture is material just as civilization is, even though the divergence between culture and civilization around the mid-nineteenth century has categorized the two as different formations with different emphases on divergent aspects of human development. How could such cultural instrument as language be usefully understood as non-material? Williams is not alone in thinking of "the materiality of language" and therefore the materiality of culture. Georg Simmel considers culture an integrated form of practice: "culture exists only if man draws into his development *something that is external to him*. Cultivation is certainly a state of the soul but one that is reached only by means of the use of purposely created *objects*" (Simmel 230).
 9. Huntington's example of the importance of culture for civilizational development is South Korea. According to him, South Korea was similar to Ghana economically in the early 1960s, but thirty years later, it became "an industrial giant" and its economy was fifteen times larger than Ghana's. Huntington asserts that this striking difference between the two economies can only be explained

in terms of their different cultures: "South Koreans valued thrift, investment, hard work, education, organization, and discipline. Ghanians had different values. In short, cultures count" ("Cultures Count" xiii).

10. Russell's dismissal from his lectureship at Cambridge in 1916 for his involvement in peace propaganda had a profound impact on Dickinson's views on Cambridge and dented his optimism about life and society. See Forster 135.
11. Western civilization, according to Russell, is made up of three sources: (1) Greek civilization, which is the best part of western culture; (2) Jewish religion and ethics, which Russell is generally negative about; and (3) modern industrialism about which Russell is ambivalent. And symmetrically in this scale of comparison are these constitutive elements of Chinese civilization: 1) Chinese philosophy, the best part of which is Taoism; (2) Chinese ethics, which is mostly articulated and embodied in Confucianism; and (3) Buddhism, about which he is not entirely negative. See Russell, *Problem* 185-98.
12. More noted contribution to the understanding of civilization is from continental Europe, especially in sociology and history. French and German re-discovery of civilization in the first two decades of the twentieth century generated an academic language in which the difference between the two gradually consolidated into an academic topic. Emile Durkheim's and Max Weber's analyses are among some of the most well-known ideas proposed. Marxist historiography has made contribution to the writing of world history which take civilization either as a singular formation or a collection of local ones. Fernand Braudel's notion of civilizations is geographically based and defined: "Civilizations, vast or otherwise, can always be located on a map". And civilizational analysis is analysis of "space, land and its contours, climate, vegetation, animal species and natural or other advantages," and of "what humanity has made of these basic conditions" (Braudel 9). His idea of civilization, however, is considered "non-culturalist" (Arnason 3).
13. The last chapter of Clive Bell's *Civilization: An Essay* is tellingly entitled "How to Make a Civilization".

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