

Keynote Address : The Methodology of the Comparative Study of Civilization

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Keynote Address: The Methodology of the Comparative Study of Civilization

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1. THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CIVILIZATION

My own training was originally in the natural sciences, in the field of biology with a particular emphasis on ecology. But somehow I have managed to wander into this new realm which I call *hikaku bummei ron*, or “the comparative study of civilization,” and I hope you will permit me some personal reminiscences on how I got from one field to the other.

As a graduate student in the latter part of the Pacific War, I was engaged in the study of the ecology of grazing animals, particularly domestic livestock, in the Inner Mongolia region of North China. In time, however, I became more interested in the pastoral tribes who raised livestock than in the livestock themselves, and ended up changing the focus of my research to the anthropological study of the Mongol peoples. I continued such work after the war, producing a series of detailed ethnographies of pastoral cultures in Afghanistan, Africa, and Europe.

In terms of my own intellectual orientation, however, the decisive turning point came in 1955 when I joined a scholarly expedition of Kyoto University to the Karakorum and Hindu Kush mountain ranges. My own job on the expedition was to study the Moghuls of Afghanistan, and on the way back, I was able to return by way of India and Pakistan. I crossed the northern part of the Indian sub-continent from the Kuyber Pass to Calcutta, and in the course of this journey I was struck for the first time by the impression of a civilization profoundly different from that of Japan. This experience combined with my earlier experience of living in China to produce in one sudden insight the revelation of the importance of the comparative study of civilization. A record of my thinking on this matter may be found in my

book "An Ecological Approach to the History of Civilization" [*Bummei no seitai shikan*, Chūō Kōron Sha, 1967].

The period of almost three decades since this revelation has been for me a time of first-hand confirmation of the theory of an ecological approach to the history of civilization. I have travelled throughout the world, to Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North and South America, the Soviet Union, and Australia. I have with my own eyes observed these different civilizations in the light of my hypotheses, continually revising them or formulating new ones in conformity with my observations.

For ten years now, I have been involved in the creation of the National Museum of Ethnology. Since it is a museum of ethnology, the staff of course includes many cultural anthropologists. More and more of these anthropologists, however, have been turning in recent years away from "culture" and more in the direction of "civilization." One result was a symposium held in 1980 on the occasion of my sixtieth year, on the theme of "Building the Science of Civilization" [published as *Bummeigaku no kōchiku no tame ni*, Chūō Kōron Sha, 1981].

As for the theme of this week's symposium, "Comparative Studies of Cities and Urbanization," I will say nothing at this point and rather await the detailed studies which all of you will shortly be presenting. I would like to say a few words, however, about my own thoughts on the broad framework of the study of civilization.

I have travelled throughout the world experiencing a variety of cultures and testing my various hypotheses, and have read variously about different civilizations. Yet I have not yet reached the point where I can put together this knowledge and experience into a single grand theory which would encompass the entire world. I hope you will forgive me for achieving little more than a desultory accumulation of bits and pieces of knowledge and experience.

2. COMPARING JAPAN AND CHINA

Over the past five years, I have been busy travelling to our neighbor China. Just last year, near the end of the year, I travelled through the Lower Yangtze region. In some ten-odd trips to China, I have managed to visit almost every part of the country and to gain at least a rudimentary knowledge about it, although I still feel that I would like to travel and learn much more. The basic reason for this travel and study lies in my interest in the comparison of Japanese and Chinese civilization.

In the past, there have been endless studies of *culture*, not only that of China but of all the countries of the world. My own approach, however, is from the standpoint of *civilization* rather than culture. Now, some may question whether we can distinguish so clearly between "culture" and "civilization," and in fact this very issue was hotly debated at last year's symposium [as recounted in the report in *Senri Ethnological Studies* no. 16 (1984), pp. 117-125]. I myself feel that I have a general answer to the problem of defining culture versus civilization, but this is not the place to reiterate such issues of detail. As I am sure most of you have experienced, the

debate over civilization and culture tends often to lapse into fruitless argument. So rather than deal with the matter of precise definition, I think that it would be more revealing to consider a specific case, and it is for this reason I have broached the topic of China. I feel that China provides an excellent case study for refining the concept of civilization, and that it offers in particular a good comparison with Japan.

China and Japan, as you all know, share much in the way of culture. There are differences, of course, but by and large they use the same writing system, and intellectuals in both countries share a common classical knowledge. In the style and tools of daily life as well, there are many similarities. Yet in spite of all this, there is something decisively different about China and Japan. This is not a difference that stems from the contrasting social systems of contemporary China and Japan. From my own experience in China before the war, I can affirm that it involves a much more fundamental difference in the way that each society has been formed.

In terms of cities, for example, the theme of this symposium, both China and Japan of course have cities, just as both have farms and both have factories—and yet there is an astonishing difference between the structure of cities in China and that of cities in Japan, just as there are striking contrasts in the way factories are run or in the way society in general has evolved. I think that these differences, which truly stagger the imagination, are not differences of culture. Rather I would argue that these are differences of civilization which have evolved *in spite of* many commonalities of culture. This is not a matter of judging which civilization is superior or more advanced. It is simply to say that similar cultural elements have been put together in very different ways in the two countries.

The discipline of Sinology has produced a vast number of studies of Chinese culture, to which Japanese themselves have made a major contribution. In the general area of comparative studies of culture as well, cultural anthropologists have built up a large accumulation of research. And yet for all this store of knowledge, it does not seem to be adequate to answer the questions, what are the critical differences between China and Japan, and what do these differences imply for the future of each nation? Detailed and specialized studies of culture are of course essential, but at the same time it is also necessary to consider the total shape of a given civilization. This is the approach which I am advocating.

3. THE STUDY OF CIVILIZATION AS A FIELD SCIENCE

The study of “civilization” may bring to some minds the efforts of thinkers like Spengler to discover the principles of the rise and fall of various civilizations. Such efforts, however, tend to degenerate into highly speculative debate. We in fact often have high-flown essays on the rise and fall of civilization submitted to this museum, and I am frankly astonished at the shallowness of it all. What we need is not this sort of vulgar approach to civilization as a kind of facile futurology, but rather a truly scientific study of civilization based on the careful accumulation of evidence. The comparative study of civilization must in the end rest on such a scientific base.

Of course the comparative study of civilization must also rest on a broad conception of the nature of civilization itself, and this will not necessarily emerge from specialized monographic studies. In this sense, the approach of modern science as it has evolved in Europe may be somewhat different from what I have in mind. It would be difficult, I think, to approach the comparative study of civilization with a Cartesian frame of mind.

To this extent, I think that the comparative study of civilization is a somewhat perilous discipline. Various theories about comparative civilization may be put forth, and each will have its own merits, but in many respects it will be impossible to prove the validity of one theory over another with the normal methods of science. It is particularly difficult to explain the history of various civilizations by way of fixed principles. In this way the comparative study of civilization is comparable to the theory of evolution in biology, for which many useful hypotheses have been proposed, but in the end they are not truly verifiable and hence do not produce scientific conclusions in the usual sense. In the comparative study of civilization, the study of the history of individual civilizations is extremely important: it is clear that no real comparative theory of civilization can be formulated without taking history into account. At the same time, it would be wrong to think that the comparative study of civilization is no more than history. If this were true, then it would be simply a matter of leaving things to historians or of reinterpreting materials collected by historians, resulting in a purely derivative field of endeavor.

I feel rather that the comparative study of civilization can itself be established as a primary scientific discipline. The starting point for this new discipline lies in the field of area studies which are now being so vigorously pursued throughout the world. In Japan, for example, there are now professional associations devoted to African studies, Mongol studies, Latin-American studies, Mediterranean studies, and to many other types of area studies. These various area studies are essentially the study of the *civilization* of particular regions. So the comparative study of civilization is simply a matter of linking these area studies horizontally. Just as area studies often involve field work, so also the comparative study of civilization can, indeed must, involve field work. At least this is the approach I myself have adopted. By travelling to different parts of the world and enjoying a variety of experiences, I have been able to put forth various hypotheses—in short, I have practiced the study of civilization as a field science. This of course is not the only approach, but I welcome the participation of others so that the comparative study of civilization can be developed at a truly international and supra-regional level.

4. THE DANGER OF BIOLOGICAL ANALOGY

This is the second year in this series of symposia on the study of civilization. It is my plan that the series continue for another eight years, for a total of ten years. At the moment there is still some confusion about exactly what the comparative study of civilization is, and about what research methods might best advance it,

so that it is too early to formulate a single answer. The comparative study of civilization has yet to produce a set paradigm: it is precisely our task to come forth with an effective paradigm.

But even with an effective paradigm, the question remains, effective to what end? My own answer would be that we must create a mutually intelligible theoretical framework for explaining the past, present, and the future prospects of the various civilizations in the world. The creation of a "mutually intelligible" theory is of course precisely the work of cultural anthropologists, but as you all realize, cultural anthropology and theories of culture in general have today reached a certain limit. I think the time has come for cultural anthropologists themselves to expand their horizons to encompass the study of civilization.

Whatever new paradigm may be put forth, I think that one useful procedure in the comparative study of civilization is the formulation of a model for the various relationships within or between civilizations. Such a model would provide a theoretical framework to clarify our understanding of the structure, function, and history of various civilizations. By choosing parallel developments and similar phenomena among different civilizations, one can compare them closely to discover exactly how they are similar and how they differ, and thereby refine the model in simpler and more elegant ways. There is nothing particularly unusual about this procedure, which is used in normal scientific inquiry.

The principle behind model-building is that of analogy. Hence one approach for the comparative study of civilization is to search for models which provide multifaceted and flexible analogies. The prototypes for such models are widely and readily available both within the natural world and within the world of man.

To give one example, let me raise the question of whether civilizations have individuality. Just as we can count human beings in whole numbers, so is it possible to count civilizations as separate units? Does a civilization in fact have the same kind of individuality? We tend often to think of civilizations as analogous to individual organisms, each occupying its own clearly defined space. In fact, however, this does not provide us with a very good model for analysis.

Or can we perhaps consider civilizations as comparable to biological species? Such an analogy is possible to some extent, but if we use it we must remember that various hidden pitfalls await us. A biological species, while maintaining a uniform individual character, changes gradually over time, eventually branching into independent species. This process seems at first glance similar in the case of civilizations, but there are many differences. In the case of biological species, there is by definition no cross-breeding. There may be hybrids of course, but these are exceptional, and as a rule the purity of a species is maintained. But in the case of civilizations, history makes it clear that there is no such thing as a "pure" civilization. Civilizations are formed through constant contact and interaction with other civilizations, and hence are by their very nature hybrids. The history of civilization is a history of cross-fertilization.

I sense that we tend traditionally to consider civilizations as comparable to

living organisms. I believe, however, that this is a dangerous way of thinking. An organism is the totality of various parts or organs which are ordered in accord with a single unifying principle, and I have grave doubts as to whether we can consider a civilization as such a closely ordered totality. At the very least, I do not think that close inspection will yield a single example of an actual civilization in the world today which manifests this kind of order. It is simply that we have fallen into the unthinking habit of considering civilizations as analogous to organisms.

In general, I thus have many reservations about the application of the biological model of an organism to civilizations. Toynbee's theory of civilization, while interesting, is based completely on precisely this sort of model, which I suspect is a reflection of the strong English tendency ever since Darwin to think in terms of biological models.

5. THE APPROACH OF SYSTEMS SCIENCE

If the model of a biological organism is inadequate for the study of civilizations, then might some other model be more appropriate? I think that in fact such a model exists. What I have in mind is another model from the natural world, that of an ecosystem. This is an issue closely linked to the theme of this symposium, that of cities, since one will reach very different conclusions depending on whether one views a city as a kind of organism or as an ecosystem.

Take the example of a single forest, which constitutes one ecosystem. The plants and animals which are its constituent elements exist in a certain relationship to one another, although these are relatively loose relationships when compared to the strict and powerful principle of order which holds together a single organism. Such an ecosystem nevertheless does exist as an entity, both synchronically in its spatial definition and diachronically in its survival through time.

A number of years ago, I proposed that the history of civilization could be understood by comparing the geographical distribution of human civilizations with the distribution of the major ecosystems of the world. I published this theory under the title of "an ecological approach to the history of civilization" (*bunmei no seitai shikan*). In time, I came to feel that perhaps civilization itself could be treated as a kind of system. Just as man together with his natural environment constitutes a single ecosystem, so a new type of system is created by the inclusion of the various tools and institutions which man himself devises: I have termed this new type of system a "civilization-system" (*bunmeitai*). The last ten thousand years of the history of mankind may therefore be understood as the history of the transition from ecosystem to civilization-system.

As you have probably grasped by now, the key point is not the concept of an ecosystem, but rather the idea of "system" itself. While using the model of the ecosystem as it exists in the natural world, I propose that civilization be understood as a "system" in and of itself. Recently in the field of engineering, systems theory has been developing rapidly, in the form of systems analysis and other related ap-

proaches. The word "system" is old, but it is relatively recent that it has come to be used in this current sense. Linnaeus used the term in his *Systema Naturae*, but his meaning was totally different from the way in which it is used in "ecosystem." Linnaeus' "system" was a conceptual method of classifying the natural order, as opposed to "system" in the sense of something that actually exists in the world. I suspect that the discovery of this modern meaning of "system" was the accomplishment of the science of ecology which emerged early in this century. This was a way of thinking which differed from the concept of the "organism" that dominated the mainstream of biology, and its influence has come to be felt most strongly in the field of engineering rather than biology.

If it is possible to view a civilization as a system, then it should be possible to describe civilization within the context of systems theory. At the present, systems theory is still in the process of development, but assuming that it continues to evolve in the future, it will become possible to treat different civilizations as systems, and to describe their characteristics, processes of interaction, and modes of operation in the same way that one would describe systems and their workings. By developing models for different types of systems, one could then develop simulation programs which might even make it possible to forecast the movements of civilizations. Given the current development of the capacity of computers, it may not be unreasonable to entertain such a vision.

6. RELATIVISM AND THE STUDY OF CIVILIZATION

Almost thirty years have passed since I first proposed the idea of the comparative study of civilization. At the time, I was attacked on all sides by those exclaiming "How can one do such a preposterous thing as compare civilizations?" or "What sort of a discipline is that?" But since then, my ideas have gradually come to be understood and appreciated, so that today there is even a professional association devoted to this approach, the Society for the Comparative Study of Civilization (*Hikaku Bummei Gakkai*).

For me personally, the comparative study of civilization has been a source of pleasure as one of my intellectual pastimes. As with all of my scholarly pursuits, I hold no expectation that it will lead to any practical results. But this is by no means to say that the comparative study of civilization has no practical potential. As I suggested earlier, the very real and practical hope for the comparative study of civilization is that it will develop a framework for mutual understanding among different civilizations.

Along these lines, the use of "Japanese Civilization in the Modern World" as the overall theme for this series of symposia reflects my conviction that the example of Japanese civilization is extremely useful in working to develop such an overall framework for mutual understanding among civilizations. I think that both geographically and historically, Japan is very well situated to provide a favorable

environment for the comparative study of civilization, thanks to the relativistic and non-individualistic quality of Japanese civilization itself.

In the past, most theories of history and civilization have been forged within the context of European individualism and hence have tended to be Eurocentric, envisioning Western Europe as the model of all civilization. Of course there have been a number of Europeans who have reacted against this way of thinking, and they have had some influence. But as a practical matter, it appears on the whole to be very difficult for a European to shift from a viewpoint fixed on Europe alone and to relativize the self in a way that can overcome a Europe-centered point of view. In this respect, I think Japanese civilization is well suited to be the ground for a more unbiased approach to the comparison of civilizations. Although it would be wrong to say that self-centeredness is absent from Japan, at least there is less of a commitment to the ideology of individualism than in Europe. I am not sure about the past, but at least in the contemporary world I doubt that there is a civilization in which the ego is so relativized and contextualized as in Japan. This is one of the most important conditions for making Japan a favorable place for the development of the comparative study of civilization.

A further consideration is that the Japanese have had direct contacts with a wide variety of different civilizations. As the Japanese economy has developed, the sphere of Japanese contact has gradually spread throughout the world. Of course there are many Europeans who have had similarly wide global experience, but at least with respect to East Asia I think that the Japanese are in a better position to develop the comparative study of civilization. One reason for my frequent travels to China in recent years has been my conviction that the comparative study of Japanese and Chinese civilization is one of the areas in which Japanese scholars can make a special contribution.

Of course, Japanese scholars have their own weak points. For example, in spite of the diligent efforts of various specialists, the Japanese understanding of Indian and Islamic civilization is still woefully inadequate. But for all the problems, I remain convinced that Japan today is very well positioned both historically and geographically for nurturing the comparative study of civilization. By taking Japan into account, it may be possible to develop a new and distinctive line of scholarly inquiry. It is for this reason that I have felt it useful to focus on the comparison with Japan as a theme of this series of symposia.

For the present, the comparative study of civilization has not yet achieved the status of a new discipline, and we have done no more here than to gather a group of scholars of different specialties, involved in the study of different areas, to work together in an inter-disciplinary and supra-regional spirit. But it is to be hoped that in this way the groundwork will be laid for a conceptual framework which is itself truly interdisciplinary and truly supra-regional. Before us extends a vast intellectual horizon. Let me close by expressing my conviction that from this gathering will emerge new ideas and new areas of inquiry for furthering the comparative study of civilization.