

Are There Cultural Borders between East and West?

Olzhas Suleimenov

The question of whether there are cultural borders between East and West is thrown up by the clear awareness of a process exacerbating worldwide contradictions which politicians call the Clash of Civilizations. However, UNESCO proposes that this opposition should be transformed into a more peaceful Dialogue of Civilizations. It is obvious that in both cases we need to disentangle the causes of differences that undoubtedly have ancient roots.

East and West appear to our perception as consequences of these causes' development over many centuries. Some cultural specialists prefer to see the phenomena as unique, independent and historically distinct from one another. And so it is possible to find arguments tending in one direction or its opposite. But it has to be admitted that looking at the separate elements is definitely more convenient – especially when such a composite concept as 'the East' covers Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, shamanism, the *Tengri* cult,¹ etc.

It is impossible to use general terms like 'eastern culture', 'oriental civilization'. But on the other hand 'western culture' and 'western civilization' are expressions that have a far more concrete meaning. This is because in our representation 'the West' is in every respect a simpler, more coherent concept, which does not put religion in last place.

The issue of the relationship between Faith and Science is an old one: it appeared at the dawn of culture and has lasted up to the present day. Why indeed have the monotheistic religions acted as a brake on science and technology in the East?

The great civilization of China can boast of bringing forth world-class treasures such as glass, porcelain, paper, musical automata, gunpowder, discovery of the principle of reactive movement and so many others. And all this before the spread of Buddhism to the Middle Kingdom. A similar barrier to scientific and technical thinking was erected in ancient India and other regions devoted to the search for *nirvana*. The effects of Islam's influence on the medieval culture of the Arabs, Iran and the

Copyright © ICPHS 2006

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192106065967

Turkic states may be seen as comparable. And now, finally, why has Christianity not been able to halt the progress of science?

Clearly the reason has to do with the fact that early in the second millennium Christian doctrine, which for ten centuries had dominated the consciousness of European societies, was forced to face up to an unexpected resistance. Through the soil that had been repeatedly trodden over there pushed up the first shoots of the intellectual legacy which had been long forgotten but was suddenly reborn. The Renaissance was the result of a cross-fertilization. Today we are perhaps witnessing the dawn of a new renaissance, a fresh cross-fertilization between East and West.

All these questions will be answered by looking first at the origins of this binary dichotomy, then at the movements of people that have taken some eastward, in search of the rising sun, others in the opposite direction, westward, each time bearing with them all their experiences and discoveries over centuries. And so we shall be able to explain the mutual cross-fertilization of civilizations and peoples, as well as the fact that it is difficult to restrict ourselves to a discourse that opposes one to another as if they were separate or separable entities.

The dialectic of the unity of opposites in action: impulses towards East and West

From time immemorial the world has been divided into two parts: the lands of the rising sun and those of the setting sun. Then the year also had a warm season and a cold one, with no semitones such as spring and autumn.

Dualism in the perception of the world's phenomena is one of the greatest of human discoveries. We have Aristotle to thank for that. Understanding nature as a system of opposite pairs (light–darkness, woman–man, left–right, etc.) led to the discovery of the formula of dialectic and the theory of the excluded third term: the development results from combat and the unity of opposites. The division of the world into East and West is part of that system of understanding.

Carried away by this idea, some historians saw extreme oppositions and their mutual relations simply as an aspect of combat. Others, who considered the matter more seriously, attempted to get at the facts proving the unity of opposites. Among the latter I include the Russian historian Lev Gumilev, son of two great poets: Nicolas Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova. It may be that the poetic principle assisted him, with its glimpse of light, in conquering history's dark labyrinths. Often poetry is closer to the truth than science.

Populations have not always inhabited the places where they live currently. Five thousand years ago the ancestors of many ethnic groups, now living in the East, occupied territory that was largely defined by its proximity to the Mediterranean, Asia Minor and the Near East. From there the forefathers of the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Turkic peoples, Indonesians . . . travelled off in search of the Sun's home. The cult of the Young Sun (which we have long since forgotten) attracted people towards the east where the holy light, a god to those who worshipped the Sun, was reborn each morning. Indeed it was there where the Sun reappeared, where 'the birds made their nests on the backs of fat sheep', that the source of the tribe's renewal

was to be found, and the succulent fruit that gave the best of them the chance to achieve immortality by forever being reborn like the Sun. For centuries that religion drove people eastwards, forcing them to conquer mountains, deserts and seas. Some came to a halt on the shores of the Pacific. Others persevered further and reached the islands of Japan and Polynesia, believing that their island or islet really was the land of the Rising Sun. But the most zealous of them braved the ocean and discovered the Continent of the Dawn: they were the Mayas, the Incas, the Aztecs . . . There they built temples in the form of pyramids with steps, like those at Sumer and Babylon, and continued to write in hieroglyphics where the most important sign was the one for the Sun, with the written variants of Ancient Egypt, Sumer and Ancient China representing the holy light that was the divinity worshipped in those times by the whole of humanity.

Thor Heyerdahl, who died only a few years ago, succeeded in discerning important similarities between the culture of the Incas and that of the inhabitants of Easter Island, which is thousands of miles west of America. He formed the theory that the Incas could have crossed the ocean on boats made of reeds firmly tied together, from the Peruvian coast to the Polynesian islands. He built the *Tigris* and after 52 days at the helm he crossed the ocean. The great researcher proved it was possible to sail across the ocean on reed boats, but he was not able to pinpoint the reason why the Incas embarked on such an enormous enterprise. What might have been the motive for such a difficult voyage westward? The quest for new lands? There were more than enough in America.

I met Thor Heyerdahl once only, in 1993 at a conference in Japan at which the 'Green Cross' international ecological movement was established, arising out of the 1992 Rio conference. Mikhail Gorbachev was elected president, while Thor Heyerdahl and I became curators. The conference was held over three days. I had put Heyerdahl's talk off to the last day, but he unexpectedly flew off home to Peru, which prevented me from arriving in time to put to him the questions I had prepared. For nowadays people think that the eastward movement in ancient times was amply motivated. The cult of the Young Sun was the cause of the first great migration of peoples: from the Mediterranean and Asia Minor/the Near East going eastward. And in my view that is how the very notion of the East came about. Then cultural and geopolitical elements were added.

The cult of the Young Sun was the religion common to the ancient world. However, priests to the different peoples did not interpret the signs of the faith in a uniform manner. This is why the attitudes of devotees also differed. One of the most important strands of the cult, of which we are still awaiting a description, encouraged some tribes to remain where they were. The ancient world was quite small and the groups living in it were few in number: maybe no more than 3–5 million, and a few dozen languages. During the subsequent millennia human beings spread out over the planet, increasing their numbers a thousandfold.

Knowledge gathered by historians helps us understand the reasons for other, less far-reaching migrations. During the third millennium BC an 'explosion of passion' (in Gumilev's phrase) drove the nomadic tribes of the ancient Semites from the south of the Arabian peninsula as far as the ancient Near East. Conquering the Sumerians, the newcomers took over their culture and writing and founded the Assyro-

Babylonian Empire in Mesopotamia. As they gradually spread out over the whole of the ancient world as it was then, the ancient Semites assimilated or supplanted the native population, which included representatives of the future Indo-Europeans, Finno-Ugrians, Caucasians and in part the Turks. In the second millennium BC we find them in ancient Asia Minor and on the Iranian uplands, which these groups crossed, moving northward and westward in search of better and more secure land.

It was less spiritual than entirely earthly and material motives that impelled the tribes left behind to colonize land beyond the borders of the ancient world. Thus was the old western world formed, with its philosophy of life that put more emphasis on practical matters than the hazy aspirations of the spirit.

The Silk Road: East meets West

And so, towards the early centuries of our era, there was a new awakening. People had already understood that the earth was not a circle but a sphere, and that even by travelling eastward they could not see the horizon getting closer. The cult of the Rising Sun turned into a cult of the Heavens, most obviously in the Chinese and Turkic-Mongol cultures.

I think the invasion by the Huns, which constituted a massive migration of people (this time from east to west), had economic origins manifested through a political basis. Rivalry and collaboration between the two great empires of the new epoch – the Middle Kingdom and the Roman Empire – were the prime reason for the ‘great’ migration. Turkic nomads living on China’s northern borders were a constant source of disturbance for the empire. Wars against them caused devastation in many Chinese provinces. Construction of the Great Wall to protect the northern borders took decades but did not safeguard the empire. Then Chinese politicians hit upon an inspired solution: turn eternal enemies into faithful servants. The Turkic peoples were invited to take charge of security on the Great Silk Road, which stretched from China to the fringes of the Roman Empire. The most important achievements of that period were often called ‘great’. But the transcontinental trade route linking east and west fully deserved the label. Trade between China and Europe did not involve silk, porcelain and spices alone. Other values of civilization were exchanged, including the latest results from the science of the time; among the great Chinese inventions were paper and gunpowder.

Gradually the Turkic peoples spread out from Mongolia to Asia Minor, for the most part following the route of the Silk Road. From the Black Sea to Andalusia, caravans were accompanied by Goths (an ancient Germanic warrior people), who had settled between the Crimea (Ostrogoths) and as far as west as Spain (Visigoths). Close cooperation between the ancient Germans and Chinese merchants and administrators is also confirmed by the etymology of relevant terms. European etymological dictionaries find it difficult to discover the origin of the word for silk: for Italian *seta* (silk) is said to come from the Latin *saeta*: 1. (horse)hair; 2. bristles (stiff pig hairs – *soies* in Fr).²

I think semantic and lexical development occurred in the opposite direction instead: ‘silk thread’ > ‘horsehair’. Indeed linguists and language archaeologists

would be well advised to look first at the Chinese word for a commodity from that source; etymology would get some solid assistance there. Chinese material was supplied to Europe under its own name, which did not need to be reinvented: in Chinese there is *si* 'silk', *sidi* '(made) of silk'.³ As far as the consonant is concerned the adjectival form is close to the Andalusian (Spanish) *seda* 'silk, silk fabric'⁴ (see also Old Russ. *šida* 'silk', *sidnyj* 'of silk').

According to these data the silk caravans, accompanied by the Goths, travelled into Spain, passing close to Rome.

Among the Germanic people in the north, Chinese merchandise arrived by a different branch of the road controlled by the Turkic peoples, who changed the Chinese word by using an adjectival suffix peculiar to them: *sidi* was replaced by *silik*⁵ 'silken'. However, among the Germanic people the adjective was understood as a noun 'silk': Eng. *silk*⁶, Old Scand. *silki*, which spread into the Baltic: Old Pruss. *silkas*, Lith. *šilkas*, and finally to Russia: Шёлк. Similarly, on the Silk Road's most southerly branch, where the caravans were usually accompanied by Turkic peoples, the Persian word *sirah*⁷ probably comes from the same etymon **silik*, as *l* frequently becomes *r* in Iranian languages. It is by this southern route that silk reached the Apennines via Iran and the countries of the Near East, which had been Roman possessions. In this connection see the Latin word *sericus*: 1. 'of silk', 2. 'Chinese', which is close to the Iranian term because of its consonant.

In the absence of written evidence the words used in oral cultures are nevertheless authoritative contemporary documents just like archaeological discoveries. We simply need to interpret them correctly and decipher the information encoded in the words. And there before our eyes are revealed the extraordinary records of the cultural exchanges between East and West which for a while were hidden from view. There are also enough written resources for us to imagine the extent of those trading relations. All this is well known to specialists but never appears in educational textbooks, not even those for universities.

The Renaissance: at the centre of new exchanges between East and West

Today you can ask a schoolchild in Paris or Baghdad how and with what the Renaissance period began. In fact which Renaissance are we talking about?

I hope 21st-century school textbooks will finally deal with this historical subject adequately by answering those questions. The topic has long been studied and known about by a dozen or so specialists but their writings have never been widely disseminated.

Christianity in the first century of the 'new era' was only slightly different from other religions. Rather it was more definite in its effort to replace science with faith. It confirmed rejection of carnal pleasure in the name of eternal happiness in heaven. All reminders of the pagan freedoms of Greece and Rome were severely repressed. The premeditated burning of the Alexandria library, antiquity's most complete collection of manuscripts, began the first Christians' crusade against the 'accursed past'. The written tradition of ancient Greece was wiped out across Europe.⁸ For a whole millennium Europe, plunged into the shadows of Christian fundamentalism,

forgot Greece's culture of the joy of living and erased it from memory. The parchment scrolls containing the ancient Greek authors' works turned up on the eastern margins of the 'world' of the time, that is in Baghdad, capital of the Arab caliphate. Young Islam was not yet locked into a cultural context. Arab scholars managed to introduce new mathematical disciplines (*al-jabr*), and revived chemistry (*al-khimiyya*) and philosophy. In the polyglot central Asia of the early Middle Ages the expression was invented: 'Turkish for warriors, Persian for poets, Arabic for philosophers'.

In the 11th century the Turk Muhammad al-Farabi translated Aristotle and Plato into Arabic, the latter being known in scholarly circles of the period as the 'World's Second Teacher' (the first place was awarded to Aristotle). These books reached Spain and Córdoba, which was inhabited by Arabs. Non-conformists from the Catholic world were also there. They translated the works of the great Greeks from Arabic into Latin. In the 11th century those books were secretly disseminated throughout Europe, giving rise to sensations and attitudes as yet unknown. And so there was reborn in Europe the feeling of joy in earthly existence. What we call the Renaissance is the rebirth of Hellenism. It was expressed in literature, the fine arts and the sciences. In this way was forged the consciousness of a *Homo sapiens*, allowing the human mind to penetrate the most hidden secrets of the creation of the world.

The spirit of the Renaissance helped to reveal meanings concealed in the well-worn texts of the Holy Scriptures. The theme 'God created man in his image' allowed the Christian consciousness of the Renaissance to rekindle the star of Bethlehem for all who could see the light. For each person is in the image of the Creator who made human beings to be creators in their turn. This consciousness hastened the development of the principle of a creative and divine person.

As a superficial summary it could be said that western culture seemed to be a synthesis of ascetic Christian morality and the Hellenic cult of earthly existence. The stubborn struggle between opposites and their unity influenced the content and the pace of development of western civilization in the second millennium AD.

Neither Buddhism nor Islam experienced similar dialectical contradictions in the process of their development. Submission to fate, fed by Faith, explained why eastern civilization lagged so far behind. Present-day politicians are forced to take account of that factor in their analysis of the conditions in the 'Asian context', where there are to be found such western concepts as socialism, democracy and globalization, among others.

Towards a new Renaissance?

However, Christianity's experience also includes disobeying biblical commandments: 'I am the Lord, I am your God. Make no idol nor any image of what is in heaven above, on earth below and in the water under the earth.'

Those who first read the Book broke the commandment by daring to represent God, his Son and the Saints, who are given the features of one race – their own. (African-American and African converts to Christianity explain their turning to Islam as their refusal to pray to a 'white god'. It is a distant consequence of this way of making things like oneself.)

Islam did not disobey the commandment it received, for it forbade the representation of God and all his creatures. Allah has no image that can be seen. He has no national or racial features. He is neither human nor animal, but God. This is stated with the greatest insistence.

What is the advantage of this conception?

Each human group attempts to approach the 'divine image' without even knowing it. In fact it is human beings' most abstract method of self-improvement. This approach might seem to make Islam 'the true religion' of the whole of humanity. If only that advantage turned out to be sufficient.

* * *

The spirit of revolt, of disobedience, was expressed in the subsequent development of the fundamental attitude to the divine creation of humans.

- I. 'God created man in his own image' (era of the prophets, first millennium BC to first millennium AD).
- II. 'God resembles me because I am a creator!' (Renaissance period, second millennium AD).

This philosophy speeded up the pace of Time significantly: over a few centuries humanity was projected into the future, seemingly further than was appropriate. A motley crew intimidated by the political doctrines and natural convulsions of the world!

Replacing the 'cold war' we have 'global warming'!

The world now has the opportunity to unite in order to survive, if East and West can evolve a conscious common action like the two hemispheres of the brain of the Universe, just as Faith and Science succeeded in doing in the enlightened Europe of the Renaissance period.

But to do that we have to know the whole truth about ourselves. Not a one-sided or one-eyed truth. East as well as West, that is our earth, the home of the Thinking Human. It is that thought which should be the basis for the ideology of this stage in the new Renaissance.

Olzhas Suleimenov

Kazakhstan's permanent ambassador to UNESCO

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. The cult of the heavens as divine among the Turkic Mongols prior to the influence of foreign religions (editor's note).
2. Bolelli (1994).
3. Present-day Mandarin: *sī* 'silk', *sī de* 'of silk', with a grammatical element forming adjectives among other things (editor's note).

4. In fact silk was well known in Rome, under two names: *seta serica* 'Chinese fabric' and *metaxa* (a Greek/Oriental term). In an impoverished West silk was a word rather than a reality. However, *seta* may explain western neo-Latin words and even the German *Seide*; *serica* is the basis for *serge*, *sarge* in Old French. But in Byzantium, which was richer and closer to the sources of silk, the material kept the oriental name: Greek $\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}\xi\iota$ > Roum. *mátase*, Alb. *Mëndafsh*; see also Armenian *metak's* (editor's note).
5. This is a very common Turkic suffix: *lik/lik/luq/lük* = 'relative to something' (editor's note).
6. English etymologists derive the word from *serica*. We should note that the trading carrier is definitely Viking because only the northern Slavs knew the word; see *svila* in S. Sl. < ? *svinja* 'pig', in Slovak *hodváb* 'fabric (German) excellent (this is perhaps the ghost of the Goths!)' (editor's note).
7. An old word, present-day Persian being *abrišam*, which came through Turkish *ibrişim* 'silk thread' into other languages (< ? Turkish root *ip-* and ending *Chine*). With the spread of silk its name became equivalent to thread (Old Cz. *ipek* 'silk' and *ip* 'thread, rope', Malay *sut(e)ra* < Skr. 'thread') (editor's note).
8. Here Europe is understood as the West (in south-eastern Europe *Franquistan*). Russians, Turks and even . . . Greeks are still suspect even now. Of course in Byzantium Greek culture remained alive, to the extent that Russian churches represented Plato as a saint. The potted history tells us that in the middle of the 19th century the Slavs of Dalmatia were forced to revive the Glagolitic alphabet, because the Greco-Cyrillic, which was better adapted to their language, was banned as being schismatic (editor's note).

References

Bolelli, Tristano (1994) *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*. Milan: TEA.