

# On the Relation Between Civilization, Culture, and Literature

WANG Zhe

Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, China

Generally speaking, civilization and culture are two different categories which are often not clearly separated, and civilization is the latest development of human culture and is the highest degree of human culture, while literature belongs to these two categories and is a more advanced stage of the development of human culture or civilization. Before we study the relation between them we should first have some knowledge about the meaning of these words.

*Keywords:* civilization, culture, literature

## What Is Culture?

“Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” (Zimmermann, 2017), and it also is “the symbol of the development of human civilization” (Liang, 2017, p. 43).

Culture is often used in two senses, a narrow one and a broad one. When it is narrowly used, it often refers to a high level of spiritual life, which is related to such things as literature, arts, philosophy, or books, paintings, theatres, musical halls, museums, colleges, institutions, etc. So in everyday language, if one only likes popular music, he is regarded as less cultural than the one who can enjoy Beethoven or Mozart. Or the one who has not gone to university is said to have less culture than a scholar. But in a broad sense, that is anthropologically, culture is defined as “the learned, integrated way of life of a people”, or “the way of life of a human society transmitted from one generation to the next by learning”. Now we can have some more detailed explanation about the definition of culture.

### 1. Culture is only human.

All animals have also a way of life but they have no culture, because culture must be learned. By learning, it can be shared among all members of a people and passed from one generation to the next. For example, one primitive man found a certain seed could be planted and after some days, he could get more such seeds as food (wheat). This knowledge is not inborn, not passed down through human genes. But he could teach it to the others and to the next generation. So culture can be passed, accumulated, and developed. A new born child can only get these knowledge by learning. Otherwise every new generation, even every single man has to go from the very beginning, that is to say, if one day human culture suddenly disappears, man would have to go back to live as animals.

We can make a comparison between culture and the way of life of animals. A monkey can climb trees; a cat will catch a mouse; chicken are able to peck soon after being hatched. They get these skills virtually not by learning. These are instincts inborn. If there had been a wise tiger who found that he could catch more rabbits by pretending death, he could not have taught it to other tigers. After his death, this skill would be lost.

### 2. Culture is integrated.

“Integrated” here means “forming a system”. Suppose some animals do learn something, such as apes, who can be taught to ride a bicycle, and also, suppose some of such skills can be passed from one ape to another; still they cannot be said to have possessed culture. These kinds of stunts are not integrated. The apes cannot systemize such skills into a whole to improve their life.

### 3. Culture is a way of life.

Culture is the essential human tool to deal with the world. We grow crops, raise cattle, build houses; we use machine to work for us; we can go up into the sky and down into the sea. We can do all these things because we have culture. Without culture man could be the weakest animal in the nature, far weaker even than rabbits, who at least can run fast and have furs to protect them from cold. Human beings are now superior to all the animals only because of culture. In this sense everything man-made is an element of human culture. Not only arts, literature, law, government, science, technology, philosophy, religion are cultures, our habits, our customs, our traditions, our thoughts and ideas, our rituals, and most importantly, our language are also cultural elements, and so is a book, a table, a tool, a pen, a piece of paper or cloth. What we eat, how we live, what we like to do, how we behave, all these things are also human culture. There are cultures about wine, tea, flower, etc. For instance, in films, we find that Americans are fond of chewing bubble gum. We say this is their culture. In most countries, private guns are not allowed, but in the United States, one can keep a gun as he likes, though the private ownership of guns has caused so many troubles. This tradition is deeply rooted in their culture, so is the protocol of “lady first” in western culture.

By the above description, we now know that in sociological study we should keep this broad sense of culture in our mind.

## What Is Civilization?

We'll discuss what is civilization by first seeing what is not civilization, so as to clear out some misunderstandings. “Civilization can be generally defined as a stage of advanced human social development and organization” (Admin, 2014), and it also “symbolizes the degree of social progress” (Yang, 1991, p. 97).

### 1. Civilization is quite different from culture in sociological study.

Culture is what makes human being different from animals, and civilization is what makes human being get rid of “primitive”. Culture appeared as early as human being appeared in this world. The earliest hunters and gatherers of tribesman had their own way of life. They social and family organization, had tools, language, religion, as well as primitive arts and literature, so they had culture, but they were not civilized. Civilization is only the latest stage of human development. Man has existed in this world for millions of years, but he has had civilization only for about 5,000 years. Civilization is the antonym of “primitive”. We have term of primitive culture, but we do not have a primitive civilization. Culture is generic, while civilization is specific. Civilization is the latest development of human culture and is the highest degree of human culture.

### 2. Civilization is not limited to a people, a nation, or a country.

This distinction is rather important in history study. In all human history, a primitive tribe or a barbarous people often conquered a civilized people or state, but usually they would often themselves be conquered by the higher level of civilization of the people they conquered and became also civilized. “The conquerors are conquered by the conquered” was a common phenomenon in the history of most ancient civilization. The invaders and the invaded were thus the co-builders and the heirs of the same civilization. We can have an

example in our Chinese history. China was once conquered a barbarous people, Mongols, but this nomadic tribe later accepted Chinese civilization and accepted Chinese language, Confucianism, as well as economical and governmental system. So Chinese civilization was not cut short by this invasion, and not replaced by a Mongolia civilization. This fact is typical of the history of western civilization. The Mediterranean world was a piece of fat meat attracting so many peoples to snatch it. Civilized nations there were often conquered by backward, primitive, even barbarous nomadic tribesmen, yet they did not change the civilization into a new one. They just added their new elements into the civilization and form a whole—the western civilization.

In China, generally speaking, the founders of Chinese civilization were also the ancestors of Chinese people. Huang Di (Yellow Emperor) is both regarded as the beginner of Chinese civilization and the forefather of Han people. The condition is quite different in western history. Neither the English people nor the Germans, nor the French can boast that their forefathers were the creators of western civilization. They were usually first as either the conquerors or as the conquered, then as the receivers and co-builders of a common civilization. So we know the history of western civilization is not a history of a special country or a particular people, not the history of England, or France, or Germany, or Italy, not to say the United States, Canada, or Australia. All these countries were formed much later than their civilization.

3. Furthermore, the concept of civilization is also not limited to a particular geographic region.

Western civilization originally mainly referred to the civilization in Western Europe, but this very civilization was not born in West Europe. It was born in East Europe and Southeast Asia. And in modern times, this civilization spread to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. And nowadays it is spreading all over the world. To some nations, the industrialization, commercialization, democratization, or generally speaking, the so-called modernization are also called “westernization”. Of course this does not mean that they move to the west. The term “west” is more cultural than geographic.

Now we are clear that the history of a civilization is not the history of human beings, not the history of human culture, not the history of a special nation or a particular country, but we still do not know what is civilization. We'll discuss this first by discussing its counterpart, that is “primitive”.

### **Here Are Some of the Basic Facts About a Primitive Society**

1. A primitive society controls a small area of land.

If the tribe is nomadic, it will occupy a few miles of pasture land in one season and perhaps migrate to another for the next season. If the tribe is settled, it may control a single small river valley.

2. A primitive people is illiterate.

They usually have no written language. They might have some single system of pictograms (pictures as sign of symbol), but there is no written language. The legends of the past are transmitted orally.

3. A primitive society has no division of labors.

It blends religion, government, warfare, production, and daily life together. Except a tribe leader, or maybe a priest, all others are tribesmen, working similarly. There are no occupational specialization, and no artists, philosophers, writers, merchants, as well as no army, no school, no court, no factory.

4. The primitive economy is based on the nomadic tribe or the agricultural village.

Of course, there are also some other characteristics of a primitive society. There few are enough to help us to have a comparison with a civilized society.

## **The Basic Characteristics of the Beginning of a Civilized Society**

### **Development of Agriculture**

Agriculture enables people to produce their own food, not to wander about to seek food. The direct result of this is that people are able to settle down. And to build a civilization, man must live permanently at a place, so that the elements of civilization can be accumulated. A nomadic tribe could not bring too many things with them when they moved from one place to another. They usually brought necessities, while the elements of civilization were usually not necessities, such as books, works of art, complex or big tools, etc. As a matter of fact, civilization is a luxury of human life. Also grain is safer food than animals and wild fruit, predicable, easier to keep. This enables people to pay less attention to their food and more to cultivate their life.

### **Use of Metal**

A civilization understands the use of metal and is capable of extracting it from the ores. Metal tools and weapons are much better than those made of stone or wood. With better tools, productivity increased.

The above mentioned two facts, that is, agriculture and use of metal, together enable people to produce more than they can eat. Surplus of food enable more people to devote themselves to non-agricultural social functions, thus the next characteristic of a civilized society is clear to be seen.

### **High Degree of Occupational Specialization**

Food surplus enable some people to do something other than getting food. Then there are artisans, merchants, officials, soldiers, man of thoughts, or man of letters. By then the cultural institutions have been so developed that they can be studied separately from one another, such as politics, economy, law, religion, literature, arts, etc.

### **Use of Written Language**

Civilized societies must have written language to keep their records and transmit their history, literature, science and technology, thoughts and ideas, or everything else about their way of life. By the writing system, the elements of civilization can be accumulated, passed down from generation to generation, and spread from one place to another. Only so can every new generation further promote a civilization on the basis of previous achievements.

### **City**

The most obvious criterion may be the growth of city. A civilization must have cities as its political, economical, and cultural centers. The very word civilization comes from the Latin “civitas” meaning city, and “citizen”—the people living in a city in Latin are “civis”.

## **The Conditions for Development of Civilization**

The earliest civilizations appeared at about the same time in human history (one or two thousand years of difference is not considerable compared with one or two million years of human’s existence on the earth). There are some recognizable conditions for the appearance of civilization.

1. Generally speaking, there were four great ancient civilizations.

It was no accidental that all the four oldest civilizations arose in the basins of Flood Rivers, the Yellow River of China, the Indus River of India, the Nile River of Egypt, and the oldest of the four is ancient Mesopotamia in the lower reaches of two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates.

2. Also it is no accidental that nearly all the earliest civilizations appeared at about the same region around the world, the region between 20-40 degrees north latitude.

Too dry or too cold a climate is of course not suitable for the growth of civilization. So the Eskimos and the peoples in African deserts were so late civilized. But too wet or too warm a climate is also not suitable. With too many plants and animals, people there are so easy to get their food that there is a lack of stimulation for the development of civilization. Civilizations did not first appear at tropical regions, where there were so many rains, forests, wild animals, and wild fruits that made hard-working unnecessary. Civilization appeared only at a place that is neither too hot nor too cold, neither too dry nor too wet. It is usually a place considerably dry but with rivers across it, where it is not easy to get water but not impossible, where people have to make efforts for a living. This becomes the necessary stimulation for the growth of civilization.

### References

- Admin. (2014). Difference between culture and civilization. Retrieved from <https://www.differencebetweenz.com/difference-between-culture-and-civilization> (2014-04-20)
- Liang, X. F. (2017). Comparison of culture connotation between Chinese traditional culture and western culture. *Modern Communication*, (21), 41-43.
- Yang, D. J. (1991). On the differences among civilization, culture and social formation. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, (4), 97-100.
- Zimmermann, K. A. (2017). What is culture? Retrieved from <https://www.livescience.com/21478-what-is-culture-definition-of-culture.html> (2017-07-13)