

Exchanges and Mutual Learning Make Civilizations Richer and More Colorful

- ¹ **C**ivilizations become richer and more colorful through exchanges and mutual learning, which form an important driver for human progress and global peace and development.
- ² To promote exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations we must adopt a correct approach with some important principles. They, in my view, contain the following:
 - ³ First, civilizations come in different colors, and such diversity has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations relevant and valuable. Just as the sunlight has seven colors, our world is a place of dazzling colors. A civilization is the collective memory of a country or a nation. Throughout history, mankind has created and developed many colorful civilizations, from the earliest days of primitive hunting to the period of agriculture, and from booming industrial revolution to the information society. Together, they present a magnificent genetic map of the exciting march of human civilizations.
 - ⁴ “A single flower does not make spring, while one hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden.” If there were only one kind of flower in the world, people would find it boring no matter how beautiful it was. Be it Chinese civilization or other civilizations in the world, they are all fruits of human progress.
 - ⁵ I have visited the Louvre Museum in France and the Palace Museum in China, both of which house millions of art treasures. They are attractive because they

present the richness of diverse civilizations. Exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations must not be built on the exclusive praise or belittling of one particular civilization. As early as over 2,000 years ago, the Chinese people came to recognize that “it is natural for things to be different.”¹ Greater exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations can further enrich the colors of various civilizations and the cultural life of people and open up still greater alternatives in the future.

- ⁶ Second, civilizations are equal, and such equality has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations possible. All human civilizations are equal in value, and they all have their respective strengths and weaknesses. No civilization is perfect on the planet. Nor is it devoid of merit. No single civilization can be judged superior to another.
- ⁷ I have visited many places in the world. What interested me most during the trips was to learn about differing civilizations across the five continents, what makes them different and unique, how their people think about the world and life and what they hold dear. I have visited Chichen Itza, a window on the ancient Maya civilization, and the Central Asian city of Samarkand, an icon of the ancient Islamic civilization. It is my keenly felt conviction that an attitude of equality and modesty is required if one wants to truly understand various civilizations. Taking a condescending attitude towards a civilization cannot help anyone to appreciate its essence, and may risk antagonizing it. Both history and reality show that pride and prejudice are the biggest obstacles to exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.
- ⁸ Third, civilizations are inclusive, and such inclusiveness has given exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations the impetus to move forward. The ocean is vast because it refuses no rivers. All civilizations are crystallizations of mankind’s diligence and wisdom. Every civilization is unique. Copying other civilizations blindly or mechanically is like cutting one’s toes to fit one’s shoes—impossible and highly detrimental. All achievements of civilizations deserve our respect and must be cherished.
- ⁹ History proves that only by interacting with and learning from others can a civilization enjoy full vitality. If all civilizations are inclusive, the so-called “clash of civilizations” can be avoided and the harmony of civilizations will

become reality; as a Chinese saying goes, “Radish or cabbage, each to his own delight.”

- ¹⁰ Having gone through over 5,000 years of vicissitudes, the Chinese civilization has always kept to its original root. As an icon, it contains the most profound pursuits of the Chinese nation and provides it with abundant nourishment for existence and development. Deriving from Chinese soil, it has come to its present form through constant exchanges with and learning from other civilizations.
- ¹¹ In the 2nd century BC, China started the Silk Road² leading to the Western Regions. In 138 BC and 119 BC, Envoy Zhang Qian³ of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) made two trips to those regions, disseminating Chinese culture and bringing into China grapes, alfalfa, pomegranates, flax, sesame and other products.
- ¹² During the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 25), China’s merchant fleets sailed as far as India and Sri Lanka where they traded China’s silk for colored glaze, pearls and other products.
- ¹³ The Tang Dynasty (618-907) saw dynamic interactions between China and other countries. Historical records reveal that China exchanged envoys with more than 70 countries, and Chang’an, the capital of Tang, bustled with envoys, merchants and students from other countries. Exchanges of such a magnitude helped spread Chinese culture to the rest of the world and introduce other cultures and products to China.
- ¹⁴ During the early 15th century, Zheng He⁴, a famous navigator of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), made seven expeditions to the Western Seas, reaching many Southeast Asian countries and even Kenya on the eastern coast of Africa, leaving behind many stories of friendly exchanges between China and countries along the route.
- ¹⁵ During the late Ming and early Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the Chinese people began to access modern science and technology through the introduction of European knowledge in the realms of astronomy, medicine, mathematics, geometry and geography, which helped broaden the horizons of

Chinese people. Thereafter, exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese civilization and other civilizations became more frequent. Naturally, there were conflicts, frictions, bewilderment and denial, but the more dominant features of the period were learning, digestion, integration and innovation.

- ¹⁶ Buddhism originated in ancient India. After it was brought to China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism, and finally became Buddhism with Chinese features, thus greatly impacting the religious beliefs, philosophy, literature, art, etiquette and customs of China. Xuan Zang⁵, an eminent monk of the Tang Dynasty, who endured untold sufferings as he went on a pilgrimage to ancient India for Buddhist scriptures, gave full expression to the determination and fortitude of the Chinese people to learn from other cultures. I am sure you have heard of the Chinese mythological classical novel *Journey to the West*⁶ based on his stories.
- ¹⁷ The Chinese people enriched Buddhism and developed some special Buddhist thoughts in the light of Chinese culture, and helped it spread from China to Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia and beyond.
- ¹⁸ Over the last 2,000 years religions such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have been introduced into China, nurturing the country's music, painting and literature. China's freehand oil painting, for instance, is an innovative combination of its own traditional painting and Western oil painting, and the works by Xu Beihong⁷ and other master painters have been widely acclaimed. China's Four Great Inventions—papermaking, gunpowder, printing and the compass—brought drastic changes to the whole world, including the European Renaissance. Its philosophy, literature, medicine, silk, porcelain and tea have been shared by the West and become part of its people's life. The book *Travels of Marco Polo* provoked widespread interest in China.
- ¹⁹ I think some of you might be familiar with the terracotta warriors and horses⁸ of the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC), one of the eight wonders in the world. After his visit to the site, President Chirac of France remarked that a visit to Egypt would not be complete without seeing the pyramids, and that a visit to China would not be complete without seeing the terracotta warriors and horses.

- ²⁰ In 1987 this national treasure was listed as one of UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage Sites. Many Chinese legacies are ranked as World Cultural Heritage Sites, and World Intangible Cultural Heritage Sites and are listed on the Memory of the World Register. Here, I'd like to express my heartfelt thanks to UNESCO for its contribution to the preservation and dissemination of Chinese civilization.
- ²¹ Today, we live in a world with different cultures, ethnic groups, skin colors, religions and social systems, and all people on the planet have become members of an intimate community of shared future.
- ²² The Chinese people have long come to appreciate the concept of "harmony without uniformity."⁹ Zuoqiu Ming¹⁰, a Chinese historian who lived 2,500 years ago, recorded a few lines by Yan Zi¹¹, prime minister of the State of Qi during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) in *Zuo's Chronicles (Zuo Zhuan)*¹²: "Harmony is like cooking thick soup. You need water, fire, vinegar, meat sauce, salt and plum to go with the fish or meat. It is the same with music. Only by combining the texture, length, rhythm, mood, tone, pitch and style adequately and executing them properly can you produce an excellent melody. Who can tolerate soup with nothing but water in it? Who can tolerate the same tone played again and again with one instrument?"
- ²³ On the planet, there are more than 200 countries and regions inhabited by over 2,500 ethnic groups with a multitude of religions. Can we imagine a world with only one lifestyle, one language, one kind of music and one style of costume?
- ²⁴ Victor Hugo once said that there was a prospect greater than the sea—the sky; there was a prospect greater than the sky—the human soul. Indeed, we need a mind that is broader than the sky as we approach different civilizations, which serve as water, moistening everything silently. We should encourage different civilizations to respect each other and live in harmony, so as to turn exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations into a bridge promoting friendship between peoples around the world, an engine driving human society, and a bond cementing world peace. We should draw wisdom and nourishment and seek spiritual support and psychological consolation from various civilizations, and work together to face down the challenges around the globe.

²⁵ In 1987, 20 exquisite pieces of colored glaze were brought to light from an underground tomb of Famen Temple in Shaanxi, China. They proved to be Byzantine and Islamic relics brought to China during the Tang Dynasty. Marveling at these exotic relics, I was struck by the thought that we should appreciate their cultural significance rather than simply admiring their exquisiteness, and bring their inherent spirit to life instead of merely appreciating the artistic presentation of life in the past.