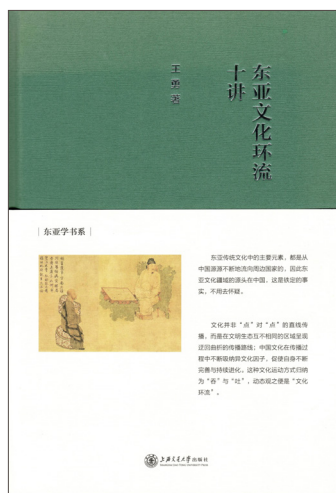


Book Review

The Spread of Civilization along the Book Road: WANG Yong's *Dongya wenhua huanliu shiji* 東亞文化環流十講 [Ten Lectures on East Asian Cultural Circulation]

Wang Yong 王勇. *Dongya wenhua huanliu shiji* 東亞文化環流十講 [Ten Lectures on East Asian Cultural Circulation]. Shanghai: Shanghai jiaotong daxue chubanshe 上海交通大學出版社, 2018. 271 pages. 311,000 words, 117 illustrations, 3 tables, preface, bibliography, postscript. Hardcover, RMB 78.00, ISBN 978-7-313-20010-5/K



Based on the concept of ‘taking the Chinese culture as the origin, the coexistence of civilization as the philosophy, and the comparative studies as the method’, the book, *Dongya wenhua huanliu shiji* 東亞文化環流十講 [Ten Lectures on East Asian Cultural Circulation], adopts an original perspective, dotted with abundant historical materials, narrating the trails of the origin, inheritance, dissemination, variation, fusion, and regeneration of east Asian culture.

This book gives a broad view of East Asian countries and forms the cultural transmission routes of China, the Joseon peninsula and the Japanese islands. On this basis, it also discusses South Asia, such as Vietnam, and West Asia covered by the silk road. From art, kinship, race, ancient books, Chinese literature, Buddhism and other cultural forms in a general sense, to the various elements of cultural images and written conversation circulating in East Asia, this paper conducts multi-dimensional textual research from different perspectives and entry points.

The most important point mentioned by WANG Yong 王勇 in

the book is the elaboration of 'Cultural East Asia'. In this regard, he not only constructed a unique theoretical framework, but also proved his point with abundant cases. The cases include the spread of material, technological revolution, and spiritual communication, among which Wang thinks the most important is the connection to the inner world. From the perspective of east Asia, the first priority is spiritual dissemination, and books play a great role.

1. Cultural Territory—Definition and Connotation

The many theoretical innovations in this book makes readers interested in the discussion of 'cultural territory'. This refers to a leading, highly developed, authoritative, and dominant culture, diffusing beyond national, religious, and national boundaries. A 'cultural territory' forms a centre in the region where its influence extends, but there is no clear boundary. This formation breaks through the stereotype of the study by nation, and discusses the multi-level radiations of the Chinese culture on the surrounding regions in terms of material civilization, technological civilization, and spiritual civilization originating from Chinese-constructed cultural homogeneity with interactions among the elements of 'origin', 'centre', and 'periphery'. It is especially impressive when the book indicates that 'the origin of the culture is innate, whereas the centre of culture takes shape by environment' during a discussion about 'the competition among traditional East Asian cultures'. The book not only constructs a theoretical model of the spreading of ancient East Asian civilization, but also reveals the regular exchanges between peoples and regions in East Asia.

The author emphasized that in the thousands of years of east Asian cultural exchanges, the following examples can be cited in addition to the well-known cultural circles of Chinese characters, Confucianism and Chinese-translated Buddhism. Since the Qin and Han Dynasties, Chinese culture has been spreading over its neighbouring states which benefited profoundly from this. A cultural community in the region formed over time and remains stable. In the Han Dynasty, silk, textile, farming, metal, and ceramics were propagated to periph-

eral regions or even the far west. Then, in the Tang Dynasty, the dissemination of laws and regulations, religions and beliefs, Confucian ethics, astronomical geography, architectural gardens, painting and calligraphy, music and dance, and so on greatly enhanced the level of civilization and knowledge of neighbouring countries.

Again, after experiencing thousands of years of vicissitudes throughout the successive dynasties of Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing, each in some locale building beyond the last generation and creating new achievements, such as Chan Buddhism, Zhuzi 朱子 doctrine, the printing press, and medical, navigation, and vernacular novels, Chinese culture reinforced and extended the territory of traditional culture. However, not one of these previous dynasties can rival the great influence of the Tang dynasty.

These innovations went abroad and spread the word, forming ‘circles’ one after another. These ‘circles’ overlap to form the territory of culture. Probably no one in the world denies that the main elements of East Asian traditional culture flowed from China to neighbouring countries. Therefore, it is an irrefutable fact that the source of East Asian cultural territory lies in China.

2. Material and Technological Civilization—Spread and Variation

From the perspective of material dissemination and production technology, such as ceramics, silk, currency and clothing, many of these spread from China to the surrounding areas. Highly developed Chinese art swept over Japan, Joseon, Vietnam, and other countries, quickly subverting the original traditions of the surrounding east Asian countries. Its art turned from closed to open, entered new vigour, and formed respective style and tide, emerging into a new circulation of East Asian art.

Wang asserted that the splendid imported art is fascinating, and neighbouring countries are keen to follow and imitate Chinese art, thus presenting a major turning point in the development of east Asian art. In the process of inheritance and dissemination of a culture, variations are bound to occur. In this sense, imitation art is not a simple copy of the matrix. Due to the transformation of the

subject, time, and space, the shape and the function may diverge into new creations. Therefore, this imitation of art should instead be regarded as a recreation of art.

According to Wang, in considering the spread of civilization from China, material civilization plays a fundamental role in that it changes the most basic living needs of the receivers. Meanwhile, technological civilization has a greater impact because it changes the lifestyle of the receivers and even the mode and power of production.

In this book, Wang gives detailed examples of several ways in which material and technology spread. Including from the first century BCE, fans were found in South Korea with a large number of bronze mirrors, brushes, copper coins, knives, and other cultural relics. Although the body, pattern, and inscriptions of mythical creature mirrors excavated from ancient Japanese tombs are different from the bronze mirrors unearthed in China, they represent a variant of the Chinese mirrors. Furthermore, Japanese emissaries to Tang dynasty built Fujiwara's city in imitation of Chang'an's city and Japan also copied the Tang China's copper coin, *Kaiyuan tongbao* 開元通寶, to make the *Wadō kaibō* 和同開寶. Japan learned from Tang China's *Yonghui lüling* 永徽律令 (Yonghui Code) to enact the *Asuka Kiyomihara ryō* 飛鳥淨御原令 (Asuka Kiyomihara Code) and the *Taihō-ritsuryō* 大寶律令 (Taihō Code). Japanese tailoring techniques were taught by the 'Wu women (吳女)' in Jiangnan during the Southern and Northern dynasties of China. The Japanese emissary to the Tang dynasty returned home wearing clothes with the taste of Tang style, which triggered the craze of Japanese Tang clothing and promoted its substantial improvement under the influence of Tang style. Mother-of-pearl handicraft originated in China and was disseminated in the neighbourhood in the height of the Tang dynasty, and was imitated and improved in Japan. In addition, Japan derived Daiwa painting from Tang painting and kana calligraphy from Chinese calligraphy. The art of ikebana, tea ceremony, Jinbi screen painting, painted scroll, academy building style, masks and other forms of harmony are also colourful, gradually become an inherent artistic trend in Japan.

The central theme throughout Wang's book is the narrative of the silk road. Wang pointed out that sericulture is not only a kind of

production technology, but also embodies the wisdom of Chinese civilization as the carrier. After becoming Martial Emperor of the Han dynasty, Zhang Qian 張騫 (?–114 BC) explored the western regions and opened up the silk road to connect the east and the west, and ‘silk’ was continuously spread to the west. The ancient Romans, based on the thinking of herdsmen, believed that these magical textiles were made from wool that was gathered from trees and invented the so-called ‘wool tree’ legend. When westerners firmly believed this myth, Chinese sericulture, mulberry planting, reels of raw silk from cocoons, and textile techniques spread to the countries of East Asia. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, silk could be produced in large quantities on the Joseon peninsula and the Japanese islands. Some silk with local characteristics was returned to China, which enriched the connotation of silk culture. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, a large number of Chinese books were disseminated overseas, which further influenced the minds of the neighbouring peoples.

In his book, Wang mentioned the extraterritorial spread and variation of material civilization and technological civilization, but he also accorded more acute topics for readers. Yangguan 陽關, southwest of Dunhuang in today’s Gansu province, has always been China’s gateway to the western regions and a pass through the south silk road. Wang wondered, however, why the massive and frequent ‘silk’ trade did not create a shared culture. Furthermore, although the ‘silk’ trade goods went abroad, why did this not expand its cultural territory?

Wang explained this problem. The material civilization represented by ‘silk’ could add exotic colours to other civilizations, but it could not fundamentally affect the shape of their civilization. The technological civilization represented by ‘sericulture’ can promote the development of the productivity of the neighbouring nations, but it cannot reshape people’s inner world. Only books that embody the ideas, wisdom, and knowledge of the Chinese nation are like the seeds of civilization sown to neighbouring countries, taking root and sprouting in foreign areas. Although there may inevitably be numerous variations, the genetic code of Chinese culture always conveys the ancient information. These continue from the source to the surrounding environment and becomes the life and soul of cultural territory.

3. Spiritual Civilization—Origin and Centre

This book focuses on the main elements of traditional east Asian culture, such as Chinese characters, Chinese classics, crafts, and Buddhism. Wang analyses the ‘source’ of its formation, the circulation of it, and the ‘centre’ formed after its development, as well as the relationship between the centres, and probes into the discourse system and power in the east Asian world.

So what are the core values of Chinese culture? What method should be adopted to construct a cultural territory influenced by the Tang dynasty? Wang summarized that it was neither conquered by force nor developed by economic means such as silk trade, but rather because the extensive and profound Chinese spirit completely changed the surrounding civilization landscape.

We can call it the ‘cultural circle of Chinese characters’ based on the common ‘Chinese characters’ in East Asia, the ‘cultural circle of Confucianism’ based on the common ‘Confucianism’, and the ‘cultural circle of Buddhism’ spread in East Asia through the Chinese translation of ‘Buddhism’. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Chinese characters were commonly used in Koguryo, Silla, Paekche, Japan, and Vietnam, and the intellectuals had high Chinese reading and writing ability. Therefore, Chinese books became the main media for the neighbouring countries to absorb advanced culture. That is to say, the Tang dynasty controlled the power of discourse in East Asia through books, characters, and laws, and constructed the values and academic and conceptual systems of East Asia.

However, it is ‘books’ that have a lasting and far-reaching impact on east Asia. If there is a ‘silk road’ symbolized by silk products between east and west, there is also a ‘book road’ symbolized by Chinese books among East Asian countries. Due to the long-term preservation, continuity, penetration, and expansion of the retention form of the classics, it is difficult to measure influence on the spiritual level of the culture imported into countries. The author first put forward the concept of the ‘book road’ more than twenty years ago, at a time when domestic and foreign mainstream media had greater repercussions.

According to Wang, envoys from western countries frequently

travelled to Chang'an. They came here aiming at silk and returned with a full load of silk. In the nineteenth century, the Prussian geologist, Baron von Richthofen, named the east-west trade route the 'silk road', which is quite appropriate. However, the emissaries from Japan, Joseon, and even Vietnam mainly came here with their eyes on books, and even bought books without silk. Therefore, the passage between east Asian countries should be called 'book road'. The 'silk road' and the 'book road' present a completely different cultural landscape. China's 'silk road' leads to the west, across the vast desert, and the camels carry the silk. Whereas, China connects the countries of east Asia with the 'book road', crossing the vast sea, a boat carries books.

The 'silk road' and 'book road' not only have different regions, communication tools and circulation contents, but more importantly, the core of civilization and the life mechanism are completely different. Silk that was once exported continuously in large quantities to the western regions in ancient times, even if unearthed from remains buried deep in the desert, is probably rotten and worn out and cannot be worn anymore. However, the books brought back by the emissaries of the Tang dynasty are still the source of people's wisdom today.

Referring to the source and centre of culture, Wang explained from his own unique perspective that the source of East Asian cultural territory is China, which we have made clear. Then, it is worth pondering, whether the centre of this cultural territory is also in China. If you look only at the three hundred years of the Tang dynasty, that is beyond doubt, but if you look back thousands of years, this cannot be said absolutely. For a cultural territory, the source is innate, invariable, and unique, while the centre is acquired, changing, and can coexist with multiple centres. The centre of cultural territory is not always at the source but tends to be where 'swallowing and uttering' is most active and condenses into a centre.

4. Cultural Circulation—'Swallowing' and 'Uttering'

This book proposes the idea of 'cultural circulation', breaking through the previous research method of 'history of cultural exchanges', and

approaches from the perspective of China, the origin of the culture. The book covers Joseon, Japan, Ryukyu, Vietnam, and more, emphasizing that culture is not circulating from ‘points’ to ‘points’ in a linear way, but rather, circulating back and forth, or in zig-zag way, among regions with different civilization and ecology. The author points out that the Chinese culture continuously incorporated various cultural factors into itself in the process of dissemination; hence, an ever-lasting evolution for the better. The author summarizes this evolution of cultural movement as ‘swallowing’ and ‘uttering’ (*tuntu* 吞吐). In other words, it is a demonstration of ‘cultural circulation’ in a dynamic view.

In the chapter of ‘the return of books from outside the region’, the author points out that this ‘book road’ is not a one-way flow, and that Chinese books from east Asian countries are also reversely imported into China along the same ‘book road’. The protagonist who plays the role of reverse input is the emissaries who bought books in Tang dynasty and brought them back to Japan. Here, the author identified the important link of ‘reverse’ in the ‘circulation’ theory and named the backflow of culture as ‘reverse input’. It also affirms that the emissaries of Tang dynasty played an irreplaceable role in the process of spreading and returning Chinese books. The author names the phenomenon and mode of this kind of cultural transmission as ‘reflux’, which has a unique philosophy and charm.

Emissaries of Tang dynasty came from far away to buy books. Before long, Chinese books took root and sprouted all over East Asia, and then returned to China where it started. The author mentioned that after Japan ‘swallowed’ Chinese culture, it entered a long stage of imitation, chewing, selection, and digestion. For example, they carefully preserved the Tang dynasty manuscripts from China, and copied or even annotated a large number of them. Another example is to absorb many elements of Esoteric Buddhism according to the national conditions, so as to form its own characteristics. When the preservation of books in China was in danger, monks were appointed to transcribe more than five hundred volumes of Tiantai classics and send them back to China, what timely and precious help it is.

From ‘swallow’ to ‘digest’ to ‘utter’, this process in one breath, finally at some time put Japan on the ‘centre’ of the throne. Mount

Tiantai 天台山 and Guoqing temple 國清寺, the source of the Tiantai School 天台宗, are revered as the ‘holy land’ and ‘birthplace’ by East Asian countries. This is the heritage left to us by our ancestors, and we should cherish it. However, to ensure the ‘centre’ status, the majestic spirit and selfless mind of the Tang dynasty are worth learning, and the inheritance and innovation of Japanese are also worthy of our reference.

It should be emphasized that the reflux of culture is not a reverse input in a pure sense. While absorbing Chinese culture, the importing country integrates the wisdom and painstaking efforts of its own nation, and on this basis, a mixed culture with the national characteristics is formed. This culture is in a certain time, through a certain way, back to its source. These cultural elements returned to China not only reflect the recipient’s interpretation and creation of Chinese culture, but also interpret the existing form and characteristics of East Asian civilization.

Wang’s book analyses the ‘power of swallowing and uttering’ of the Tang dynasty to promote the circulation of East Asian culture, as well as its ‘cultural vitality’. That is to say, whether a nation swallows or utters, it can stimulate the vitality of creation. ‘Circulation’ is not limited to ‘book’, the main theme of exchanges among ancient East Asian civilizations. Instead, it is the actual operation status in the process of exchanges at various levels, such as personnel exchanges, cultural exchanges, and material circulation. This reveals the rules, methods, and characteristics of ancient East Asian cultural exchanges, provides an important theoretical support for the study of East Asian regional culture, and will be widely used in many aspects of East Asian humanities.

Wang stressed that the output of culture is not just charity, and cultural uptake is not just about receiving. Only two-way, or even multi-way, communication can make a good culture earn eternal life. This is the road in the search for books, the most profound understanding. Undoubtedly, the personnel not only shoulder the heavy responsibility of cultural exchange, but also function as cultural carriers, and their flow and integration will also drive the ‘circulation’ of culture.

The book raises important points as follows: the origin and centre

of the cultural territory is a consolidate manifest of the ‘soft power’ of a nation and a country. This kind of cultural soft power has stronger penetrating power and affinity, flexibility and sustainability than military and economic power when constructing a new international order in the future. The liveliness pertaining to the ‘origin’ requires our undertaking and care, whereas the role of the ‘centre’ requires our activation and endeavor. Without vigilance, not only will we exit from the role of the ‘centre’, but also, we might even exhaust the liveliness of the ‘origin’. Embracing the discussion of cultural circulation at such a high strategic viewpoint, Wang’s book presents high academic value and this point is worth our in-depth thinking, but also left us with never-ending homework.

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