

# Civilization and exchange

## The Emergence of Urban Civilization and Trade

The long history of human civilization has witnessed several significant leaps at various junctures. Among these, the emergence of urban civilization marked a major leap from previous agricultural and pastoral societies. A city is a densely populated area where people do not directly engage in agriculture. It serves as a central hub politically, economically, culturally, and socially within a society. Cities possess primitive forms of state organization and are composed of hierarchies such as priests, officials, warriors, artisans, and merchants who are not directly involved in food production. Cities represent a more concentrated form of social integration. Consequently, power becomes centralized, religions are organized, and myths are systematized. Monuments like palaces, temples, and tombs symbolize these developments. The urban revolution also saw the early development of scientific knowledge (such as astrology, calendars, mathematics, chemistry, medicine, etc.), as well as the invention of writing and numerical systems, all aimed at strengthening societal cohesion.

The establishment of urban civilization above all requires the development of commercial and trade activities. Simply advancing agricultural production and generating surplus agricultural products alone will not give birth to cities. These surpluses need to be traded and exchanged for something else. Without this, constructing cities is not possible. Surpluses in agricultural products are essential precisely for trading with other goods. When surpluses in agricultural products occur, a craftsman class that does not need to directly engage in food production, emerges

leading to the development of handicrafts. Trade becomes necessary both to sell these products and to import raw materials such as metal materials.

Cities are hubs of exchange for people, goods, and information, serving as nodes in these networks and as arenas for interaction among various centers and elements. Through these interactions, urban civilizations thrive even further. In the formation of urban civilizations, crucial attention must be given to the interactions and exchanges among cities established in various regions. Cities intertwine closely through trade and other means, influencing each other's development. Eventually, they form large civilizations structured around networks of cities. The so-called Four Great Civilizations were characterized by such networked civilizations where cities were tightly interconnected. Even the unified states that emerged within these Four Great Civilizations were based on networks of cities. One of the roles fulfilled by these unified states included managing and protecting trade, securing and defending transportation routes.

Civilizations that arose at least on the Eurasian continent all developed along major rivers. However, it is not sufficient to attribute this solely to the convenience of extensive irrigation for agricultural production. We must also consider the facilitation of riverine transportation for trade. The Mesopotamian civilization that formed along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers did not just build urban civilizations relying solely on surplus agricultural produce. Rather, this civilization formed urban centers by trading surplus agricultural goods with timber, stone, metals, gemstones, and other commodities from distant regions. Similarly, the Egyptian civilization did not solely rely on surplus barley and wheat from the blessings of the Nile to form urban civilizations. Utilizing riverine trade along the Nile for north-south trade and with Mesopotamia, Egypt also formed massive urban civilizations. Furthermore, through trade with Mesopotamia and Egypt, urban civilizations like the Hittites and

Minoans emerged around these civilizations. Thus, urban civilizations expanded and spread, interconnected by a dense network of trade, fostering further development of these civilizations.

The Indus Civilization, represented by cities such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, which were built under organized urban planning, would not have developed without vigorous trade with Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the Elamite civilization of the Iranian plateau and the Gulf civilization along the Persian Gulf, which developed in the intermediate zone between the Indus and Mesopotamian civilizations, contributed to the development of both civilizations by mediating trade between them.

The Yangtze River civilization in mainland China, during the Liangzhu Culture period, already exhibited characteristics of urban civilization. The establishment of this urban civilization also necessitates considering long-distance trade facilitated by the Yangtze River's waterway transport. Subsequently, the Yellow River civilization that emerged in the Yellow River basin of North China, centered around the Shang Dynasty, similarly presupposed vigorous trade activities. Furthermore, there were exchanges between this Yellow River civilization of China and the Mesopotamian civilization in West Asia. Items such as painted pottery and knowledge of astronomy were brought to China from Sumer and Babylon via the oasis routes. Civilizations develop mutually through interaction with one another.

The civilizations of the New World, particularly those in Mesoamerica and Andes, developed relatively isolated from the Old World. Consequently, the conditions that led to the establishment of urban civilizations in Eurasia do not necessarily apply to urban civilizations in the New World. Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations primarily formed urban civilizations during the stages of the New Stone Age. Furthermore,

their development lagged behind that of the Old World, and the use of metal tools came later. In addition, writing was not invented in Andean civilizations. However, they share similarities with Old World civilizations such as population concentration, the construction of monumental buildings, and flourishing trade. In terms of trade and exchange, there was active trade between city-states in Mesoamerica and among city-states in the Andes. There were also frequent exchanges between Mesoamerica and the Andes. Moreover, there were interactions between the Old and New Worlds as well. Through trade and exchange, civilizations in the New World also developed. In this way, both North and South American civilizations eventually gave rise to unified states.

In the past, there was a theory that the establishment of urban civilization stemmed from the surplus agricultural produce. As irrigation technology advanced and agricultural productivity increased, surplus agricultural goods became available. This allowed for the support of a population not engaged in farming, leading to social stratification and the emergence of ruling classes. However, this theory, which emphasizes agricultural culture in the origins of urban civilization, must be criticized for its neglect of non-agricultural cultures such as commerce and trade. Marxist theories, which derive relations of domination and subordination from land ownership in the formation of states, also have significant limitations as they overlook trade and exchange. Cities cannot form without trade, and civilizations cannot emerge without exchange. The development of political systems also arises from the necessity of managing trade. A city-state can form simply by managing trade, even without land ownership. Considering that long-distance trade was already thriving in the agricultural societies of the Neolithic era before urban civilization, it must be acknowledged that the emergence of civilization involves aspects beyond just food production. Civilization cannot arise without the exchange of produced food with other essential and luxury goods.

## Role of Exchange

Humans are beings that engage in exchange. Through exchange, humans can enrich their lives. Trade exists for this purpose. Trading activities are ancient in human history. Activities such as hunting–gathering and agriculture are closely tied to regional natural environments and their constraints. However, through trade, humans can surpass these limitations. Trade is a human activity that transcends climate and geographical conditions. Regions with different natural environments can exchange their products through trade and thereby enrich each other. No region can sustain itself without trade with others. Furthermore, trade promotes the development of transportation, facilitates encounters between people, and advances cultural exchange. Humans cannot achieve as much within limited groups alone. However, through interaction and the exchange of technologies, knowledge, and information, humans can mutually develop. Trade thus serves as a crucial catalyst for the mutual development of civilizations.

Carl Polanyi categorized human economic activities into three types: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange. Gift exchange involves transactions conducted within reciprocal relationships among parties, typically involving ceremonial gift exchanges, diplomatic missions, and political acts. On the other hand, administrative trade is conducted by trading entities granted patents by states or nations, where aspects such as exports, imports, pricing, measurement, and trading ports are rigorously controlled by the state. Often, intermediaries and merchants act as agents of the state in this context. In contrast, market trade refers to transactions conducted freely among parties, where prices fluctuate based on market demand and supply dynamics.

However, in reality, economic activities throughout human history have involved a mixture and coexistence of these three types. Furthermore, these types of transactions do not necessarily represent stages of human historical development. In fact, economic activities carried out in each historical stage have involved elements of the other types alongside them. The contributions that these trading activities have made to the development of human civilization are significant.

### **Mediators**

The role played by intermediaries such as merchants, travelers, immigrants, nomads, and seafarers in the development of civilization is profound. These mobile groups served as mediators connecting different civilizations through their trade and cultural exchanges. Through the mediation of these mobile groups, goods and information traveled, leading to the formation of new social orders through these interactions. Alongside these mobile populations, new civilizations were disseminated, often sparking significant cultural shifts and changes. The impact of mobile populations on these shifts in civilization is substantial.

The role played by commercial traders involved in trade is immeasurable in the exchange and transformation of civilizations. They traversed boundaries between different civilizations, formed networks of human interaction, and conducted commerce through these networks. As a result, they contributed to the mutual permeation of different civilizations. Their role was nothing less than bridging civilizations. However, this bridging had profound implications for civilizational change.

In ancient times, the Phoenicians, who were active in maritime trade in the Mediterranean, played a crucial role as intermediaries between the civilizations of the Orient and those of Greece and Rome by transporting goods from various Mediterranean regions. In the Middle Ages, Islamic merchants traveled along extensive overland routes from the West African coast to China, and they also conducted vigorous trade activities across the vast seas from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and East Asian seas. Through these activities, they significantly influenced the civilizations of both East and West Eurasia.

The Sogdians, who thrived through the Oasis Route, established settlements across Eurasia, creating a network that expanded the flow of people, goods, and information, facilitating vigorous commercial activities. Through these endeavors, the Sogdians played a significant role in bridging East–West civilizational exchanges. Additionally, Armenian merchants, prominent from the early modern period onwards, engaged in commerce primarily along Iran’s Oasis Routes, extending their influence to the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Southeast Asia. Particularly from the early 17th to the early 18th century, their activities aided European expansion into Asia.

Among the merchant classes who operated between civilizations throughout history, one group consistently maintained its unshakable position from ancient times to the modern era: the Jews. Rebelling against the Roman Empire and subsequently dispersed across its territories, Jewish communities engaged in Mediterranean trade and played significant roles in the spread of Christianity. In the medieval Islamic world and beyond, Jewish merchants thrived, forming networks connecting the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and East Asia, thereby linking Arabia, East Asia, and Europe. Their activities persisted into the modern era following the decline of Islamic influence, continuing to wield significant but often unnoticed influence to this day.

Chinese overseas communities, since the Song dynasty, have spread throughout East Asia, forming a tight network of people that significantly controlled a substantial portion of East Asian trade activities. Many of these overseas Chinese originate from Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces. They established settlements across East Asia, solidifying their foothold with their inherent diligence and contributing to the cultural exchanges among East Asian civilizations.

When we examine the activities of commercial diasporas, including Jews, Phoenicians, Sogdians, Armenians, overseas Chinese, and others, we cannot overlook the significant role they played in the exchange of civilizations. Diasporas, in a broad sense, maintained strong ties to their faith and culture while living dispersed among other ethnic groups away from their homelands or native lands. Building on these strong bonds, they formed extensive networks transcending borders, primarily through commercial activities, contributing significantly to the history of civilizations. Their role in civilization history was that of catalysts mediating between different civilizations. In a diverse world where multiple civilizations coexisted, they facilitated the diffusion, mixing, and creation of new civilizations. Therefore, human history cannot be understood merely as an extension of sedentary agricultural cultures; it is essential to recognize that the dynamics of civilizations have largely occurred under the influence of non-sedentary, mobile cultures.

Travelers and students studying abroad play a significant role in civilizational exchange and diffusion. The foreign information and new knowledge they bring contribute not to the wholesale propagation of civilizations like mass migrations, but rather to partial dissemination. Nonetheless, even this partial spread leads to



changes and formations within civilizations. For example, travelers and missionaries such as Marco Polo and Carpini, who visited the capital of the Mongol Empire via routes like the Maritime Silk Road, the Oasis Routes, and the Grassland Routes, greatly influenced medieval Western Europeans with the information they brought from the East. This influence even sparked the Age of Discovery in early modern Western Europe. Similarly, figures like Faxian and Xuanzang, who brought Mahayana Buddhist scriptures from India through the Oasis and Maritime Silk Roads, facilitated significant developments in Chinese civilization without which, these would not have occurred. The formation of Japanese civilization was also driven by new information and knowledge from the continent brought by immigrants, diplomatic envoys, monks, and students studying abroad.

The translation activities undertaken by overseas students, monks, and immigrants have played a significant role in the transfer of civilization. In the 12th-century Renaissance in Western Europe, for instance, Arabic scholarship was transferred through the efforts of scholars and monks who visited Iberia and Sicily, resulting in the translation of a vast amount of Arabic scientific and philosophical literature into Latin. Similarly, the transmission of Mahayana Buddhist scriptures to China was facilitated by numerous scholars from the Western regions, such as Kumarajiva. It is crucial to recognize the mediating role of these immigrant monks and scholars

Among travelers, pilgrims in particular have played a significant role in civilizational exchange and transformation. For instance, the Mecca pilgrimage in the Islamic world triggered extensive human mobility, fostering close exchanges of people, goods, and information across vast regions. This pilgrimage simultaneously catalyzed advancements in transportation, communication, travel industry, commerce, and finance, consolidating the Islamic world into a cohesive network and serving to integrate the region. Similarly, Christian pilgrimages to holy sites in Europe

contributed to the introduction of Byzantine and Islamic cultures. These pilgrimages also spurred the development of cities and commerce, contributing to the cultural unity of European civilization.

Even in the New World civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes, which were thought to have developed relatively independently, there was vigorous interaction. Diplomatic envoys, merchants, athletes, and others frequently traveled between city-states, actively facilitating cultural exchange and playing the role of intermediaries. Without their efforts, the development of these New World civilizations would likely not have occurred as it did.

### **Nomadic Peoples**

Nomadic peoples played a significant role in the exchange and transmission of civilizations. Nomadic tribes of horse-mounted warriors traversed the grasslands of Central Eurasia from east to west, connecting and influencing the agrarian urban civilizations that developed across the Eurasian continent. These nomads were not merely raiders; they primarily engaged in trade, transporting bronze and iron implements, silk, and horses, thereby playing a crucial role in the cultural dynamics between East and West. In fact, the widespread dissemination of iron tools and their manufacturing techniques, carried by these nomadic tribes, contributed to significant social upheavals. This backdrop facilitated simultaneous spiritual revolutions in regions like Syria, Greece, India, and China, ultimately enabling the construction of great empires throughout Eurasia. Moreover, the nomadic peoples of Central Eurasia introduced silk acquired through trade with Chinese dynasties to Western Eurasia, profoundly influencing the civilizations of the Western region. Additionally, the vast empires established by the Mongol peoples in Eurasia fostered cross-continental trade through both land and sea routes, further stimulating cultural exchange between East and West.

The nomadic peoples, upon reaching the coast, would transition into maritime nomads. They would exchange their horses and camels for ships and engage in maritime transportation and trade. The Arabian merchants who thrived in the Indian Ocean similarly extended their nomadic and caravan activities onto the sea. Even the maritime-oriented Europeans of the early modern era, such as the Vikings and Normans, inherited the traditions of maritime nomadism. These Vikings and Normans were descendants of the Germanic tribes who were semi-agrarian and semi-nomadic on land. Starting from early modern Europeans, maritime navigators played a significant role in the fluctuations of civilizations across the East and West through the exploration of new sea routes.

The impact of ethnic migrations on changes in civilizations is immeasurable. When we look at the histories of various civilizations, it is not enough to only consider the vertical line of autonomous development within a single civilization. We must also consider the horizontal lines of change that occur through interactions between civilizations. Ethnic migrations arguably bring about the most significant changes in these horizontal relationships. Such migrations forcibly introduce heterogeneous civilizations into another, leading to the collapse of existing civilizations. However, conversely, these interactions can also result in fusion and synthesis between invading and existing civilizations, giving rise to new civilizations. Ethnic migrations thus bring about both destructive and creative changes within civilizations.

When we look at the long history of civilizations rising and falling across the Eurasian continent, we can trace significant moments of change marked by the invasions of nomadic peoples from Central Eurasia. In these instances, new cultures introduced by these nomads were forcibly integrated into the existing urban agrarian societies. Out of these cultural conflicts emerged new civilizations. Particularly notable was the nomads' adeptness in social organization and their ability to assimilate the cultures and technologies of the lands they invaded, integrating them under new values to generate novel civilizations. The nomadic peoples were not

merely agents of destruction; they also contributed to the creation of new civilizations, becoming pivotal in shaping the history of human civilization.

The agricultural urban civilizations of Mesopotamia, which emerged around 3500 BC, were constantly evolving due to frequent incursions by pastoral nomadic peoples such as the Akkadians, Kassites, and Assyrians. The intrusion of pastoral cultures into Mesopotamian agricultural city cultures also led to the creation of new sciences and laws.

The migration of the Aryans around 2000 BC also brought significant cultural changes to various parts of Eurasia. With their sharp iron tools and chariots, the Aryans invaded and disrupted indigenous civilizations in Anatolia, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, the Indus Valley, and other regions spanning Europe, the Mediterranean, the Near East, and India. They destroyed local civilizations while also assimilating elements of them, ultimately contributing to the creation of new civilizations.

The spiritual revolution from the 8th to the 4th century BC occurred nearly simultaneously from west to east across Eurasia, influenced significantly by the migrations of Central Eurasian nomadic pastoralists. Invasions by nomadic peoples such as the Scythians and Xiongnu disrupted indigenous matrilineal agrarian cultures in regions like Greece, Syria, India, and China, implanting paternalistic and rationalistic ideologies atop them. Out of the interaction between these agrarian and nomadic cultures emerged a new worldview.

From the third to the sixth century AD, the invasion of nomadic horseback tribes into Eurasia led to the collapse of major empires in the west, east, and south, giving rise to new civilizations in their wake. The Germanic tribes that destroyed the Western Roman Empire brought forth Western European civilization in its place, while the northern nomadic horseback tribes that invaded northern China ultimately

brought about the downfall of the Qin and Han empires, contributing to the formation of the second phase of Chinese civilization under the Sui and Tang dynasties.

In the 7th century, there was a rapid expansion from the Arab-Islamic peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. From the 9th to the 11th century, there were continual ethnic migrations, such as the movement of Central Eurasian nomadic horse-riding peoples eastward and westward, and further movements of Turkic tribes into Anatolia. It seems that global-scale environmental changes were the backdrop to these movements, whose impact on the medieval civilizations of Eurasia cannot be underestimated. The Mongol Empire, established in the 13th and 14th centuries across Eurasia, symbolized the peak of civilization created by these Eurasian horse-riding peoples.

In Mesoamerica, there were significant civilizational changes around the 10th century driven by environmental shifts. Many city-states collapsed, and taking advantage of this turmoil, different ethnic groups invaded. The Aztec Empire in Central America was founded by northern ethnic groups taking advantage of the chaos to invade. In this regard, this parallels the civilizational changes around the 10th century in Eurasia.

### **Transmission of Civilization**

Civilization does not exist without interaction. It is through interaction that changes in civilization occur. Civilizations form themselves through contact with other civilizations. Through exchanges and contacts between civilizations, new cultural artifacts and information spread from one civilization to another, significantly influencing them.

When cultural elements from one civilization flow into another, they often undergo transformation to fit the local soil and environment, a process known as cultural assimilation. Different civilizations, having distinct contexts, interpret and translate the same cultural elements in various ways when exchanged. Concurrently, indigenous cultures also adapt in response to incoming cultural elements. Thus, indigenous and foreign civilizations merge, giving rise to new styles of civilization. This phenomenon occurs not only in religion but across various aspects, where local beliefs continually blend and evolve alongside incoming influences, gradually establishing themselves. Civilizations frequently leap forward through stimulation and impact from other civilizations. It is through interactions between civilizations that new civilizations emerge.

Through contacts such as the interaction between Sumerian agricultural city culture and Akkadian nomadic culture, Babylonian science and law were developed. Similarly, the fusion of Indian Buddhism with Hellenistic culture gave rise to Mahayana Buddhism and Gandharan Buddhist art. Hellenistic culture permeated Syrian Jewish traditions, leading to the creation of Christianity amid cultural conflicts. Creative cultures emerge from the encounters and amalgamation of civilizations. Civilizations manifest diverse forms through encounters and amalgamations with other civilizations, fostering multifaceted developments. Styles of civilization are not solely indigenous creations but evolve through the synthesis.

It is not impossible for civilizations to develop independently or for civilizations to evolve in parallel with each other. The Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations of the New World developed relatively independently, shielded from external influences. Nevertheless, they progressed in forms similar to developed civilizations like ancient Egypt, advancing from agricultural to urban revolutions and eventually forming unified states. Therefore, it's not feasible to explain all changes and developments of civilizations solely through diffusion. But, even in the New World, there were interactions between civilizations from north to south, and cultural elements did propagate across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.