



The Global History of Humankind in Karl Jaspers

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Abstract: This essay will examine some key aspects in Karl Jaspers' global history of humankind. First, I explore Jaspers' idea of civilizational continuity and its example in the Axial Age. The Axial Age concentrated on the simultaneous, but independent, origins of civilizations from 800 to 200 BC. While it had a clear cosmopolitan intent, it was, however, vulnerable to the charge of lacking empirical evidence. Second, I argue that Jaspers' idea of mutual civilizational grafting is a better way of establishing civilizational continuity than the Axial Age, since it is based upon empirical history. Using historical scholarship, I will elaborate on the example of the relationship between the Jesuits and the upper class Chinese, including Emperor Kangxi. They showed serious commitment toward each other's culture, even to the point of mutually adopting cultural practice. Thus, Jaspers' idea of mutual grafting refutes the charge that his global history would be too superficial.

After the Holocaust, German philosophy tended to avoid a grand universal historical scheme in the Hegelian tradition. In contrast, for Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), the Holocaust in fact became the starting point for his universal history. He not only single-handedly resurrected this area of philosophy, but he did so by avoiding being Eurocentric. After the end of World War II, Jaspers wrote extensively about "the global history of humankind,"¹ his main work being *The Origins and Goal of History* (1949). The German historian Golo Mann perceptively noted his post-war expansion to historical thinking. According to Mann, the great influences on the young Jaspers, such as natural science and psychology, Kierkegaard, Max Weber, and Kant, did not guide him to history. But later, Jaspers' historical consciousness became "sharpened through

the experience of the crisis of our century."² It led him to "a concept of humankind" (*JGD* 143) and "a concept of total history (*Gesamtgeschichte*)." Mann still reminded the reader that Jaspers' historical writings were different from those of academic historians or history in the sense of a good old time (*JGD* 144). Jaspers' understanding of history was uniquely not oriented towards the past, but the future.

As Mann pointed out, Jaspers' historical thinking became sharpened through historical events and his universal history closely reflected his struggles with them. This essay will examine its key aspects in two parts. In Part I, I will point out how Jaspers rejected a Weimar historicist tendency towards civilizational isolationism and how he instead emphasized civilizational continuity. He established civilizational continuity through the Axial

¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 17 [henceforth cited as QGG].

² Golo Mann, "Jaspers als geschichtlicher Denker," in *Karl Jaspers. Werk und Wirkung*, ed. Klaus Piper (München: R. Piper & Co Verlag, 1963), 144 [henceforth cited as *JGD*].

Age, which concentrated on the simultaneous, but independent, origins of civilizations between 800 to 200 BC. While it had a clear cosmopolitan intent, it was, however, vulnerable to charges of lacking empirical evidence. In Part II, I will argue that instead of the Axial Age, a better way of showing Jaspers' position of civilizational continuity is through his idea of mutual civilizational grafting, since it is based upon empirical history. Using historical scholarship, I will elaborate on the example which Jaspers only sketched; namely, the relationship between the Jesuits and the upper-class Chinese, including Emperor Kangxi, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They showed not only remarkable openness towards each other's culture, but also serious commitment even to the point of adopting each other's culture. Thus, Jaspers' theory of mutual civilizational grafting could refute the criticism that his global history is too superficial.

Civilizational Continuity and the Axial Age

Jaspers vs. Weimar Historicists. Jaspers' idea of civilizational continuity challenged the isolationist tendency of several German historicists after World War I. The most prominent examples were Oswald Spengler and Ernst Troeltsch. Politically, they were opposed. Troeltsch, a liberal, supported Weimar democracy, whereas Spengler, a neo-conservative, rejected it. Yet they shared the historicist emphasis on individuality to an extreme degree and they saw civilizations to be distinctively separate islands without any common qualities. Jaspers criticized such an isolationist view:

All assertions of absolute alienness, of the permanent impossibility of mutual understanding, remain the expression of resignation in lassitude, of failure before the most profound demand of humanity—the intensification of temporary impossibilities into absolute impossibilities, the extinction of inner readiness.³

Jaspers was thus willing "to perpetrate that 'violence' against the historic in favor of the universal, the one historicity of being-human ... a unity of meaning by virtue of the inter-relatedness of everything."⁴ Against this isolationist tendency, humankind, Jaspers argued, was

"always mobile" and it has "long ago taken possession of the surface of the earth" except perhaps Australia and America, but even the latter were "not absolutely isolated" and were still subject to foreign influence (*OGH* 254).

Jaspers specifically opposed "Spengler's absolute separation of cultures standing side by side without relations." Instead, he wanted to "point to the empirically demonstrable contacts, transferences, adaptations (Buddhism in China, Christianity in the West), which for Spengler lead only to disturbances and pseudo-morphoses, but are in fact indications of a common fundament" (*OGH* 277, note 3). However, Ernst Schulin found Troeltsch to be more problematic than Spengler, for Troeltsch's status as a liberal thinker and "the most important philosopher of history at that time" lent it more scholarly credibility.⁵ Troeltsch's rejection of universal history as unsociological also found several followers, not only among ancient historians, the medievalists, and the orientalist, but also with sociologists.⁶ As a result, Schulin criticized Troeltsch's narrowing of universal history to "the universal history of Europe" and commended Jaspers's new impetus in German universal history.⁷

In contrast to Schulin, Aleida Assman dismissed Jaspers' history of humankind for being "a chimera" and preferred Troeltsch's more realistic Europeanism.⁸ I partially agree that Jaspers' Axial Age could be vulnerable to Assman's criticism for lacking empirical evidence, but her criticism, as I will show later, could not be applied to Jaspers' mutual civilizational grafting. I, however, firmly disagree with Assman's approval of Troeltsch's "realism." Troeltsch's historicist position which refused to see any commonness between civilizations, even in the case of mathematics, was not only unrealistic, but also opposed the integration of non-Christian groups within Europe. Unlike the Weimar historicists, Jaspers' "unique universal" emphasized not only the individuality of each

⁵ Ernst Schulin, "Einleitung," *Universalgeschichte*, ed. Ernst Schulin (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1974), 30.

⁶ Schulin, "Einleitung," *Universalgeschichte*, 29-31.

⁷ Ernst Schulin, *Traditionskritik und Rekonstruktionsversuch: Studien zur Entwicklung von Geschichtswissenschaftlichem und historischem Denken* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1979), 188.

⁸ Aleida Assmann, "Jaspers's Achsenzeit, oder: Schwierigkeiten mit der Zentralperspektive in der Geschichte," in *Karl Jaspers – Denken Zwischen Wissenschaft, Politik und Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988), ed. Dietrich Harth, 203.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 264 (henceforth cited as *OGH*).

⁴ Karl Jaspers, "World History of Philosophy," in *Karl Jaspers*, eds Leonard H. Ehrlich and Richard Wisser (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1998), 19.

civilization, but also the continuity between civilizations. He did not lose sight of the possibility and necessity of intercivilizational communication.⁹

The Axial Age. Jaspers' Axial Age, which occurred between 200 and 800 BC, intended to establish a sense of connectedness between civilizations. At this time, "the spiritual foundations of humanity" were laid "in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece" and these were "the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today."¹⁰ Jaspers highlighted how the recollections and reawakening of its potentialities afforded a spiritual impetus to humanity. He emphasized humankind as a whole sharing a "great spiritual history in common"¹¹ and saw "meaning, unity, and structure in history" (*WW* 97). The Axial Age, Jaspers emphasized, preserved "a feeling for historicity itself, as distinct from general abstraction" by pointing to a specific historical juncture around the fifth century B.C. It increased "communication and continuity" to obtain "a conscious view of the entire philosophy of mankind" (*PW* 296, 298).

The Axial Age was an especially intriguing idea, since it pointed to a sense of continuity between civilizations at the time when little or no actual contact took place. Civilizations in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece occurred, Jaspers pointed, out, "simultaneously," but "independently" (*WW* 98). Although some contacts existed among biblical religions and between "the Jews and Greeks," contacts between civilizations at this period were "transitory or lacking" (*PW* 297) or mostly "one of contemporaneous, side by side existence without contact" (*OGH* 52, 10).

Some scholars complimented Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age. For instance, Young-Bruehl welcomed it for it opened "a new access to the past" and set "a tradition of access."¹² Jaspers' Axial Age, however, invited several criticisms as well. It failed to explain how the simultaneous, but independent origins of major world

religions were possible. Without actual connections between them, it appeared to be only a coincidence to his critics. Oskar Köhler's criticism that Jaspers wrote "secularized Salvation history" was certainly excessive, but Jaspers was to some extent open to that criticism for writing "empirically inaccessible universal history."¹³ Nobert Rigali also questioned Jaspers' Axis for not being based upon an empirical fact, but for being transformed "by the subjectivity of his own existential consciousness," that is, his philosophical faith.¹⁴ Due to the lack of an empirical historical basis, Jaspers' Axial age was open to these criticisms. In the next section, I will point that Jaspers' idea of mutual civilizational grafting could address this weakness of the Axis Age.

Mutual Civilizational Grafting: The Jesuits and the Chinese

A less theoretically problematic part of Jaspers' universal history is the idea of mutual civilizational grafting. Whereas the Axial Age tried to establish a sense of connection around the fifth century BC before frequent contacts between civilizations took place, mutual civilizational grafting addressed the relatively recent past and the present. Besides a dominant colonial relationship between the West and the non-West, Jaspers, however, detected another type of relationship dating from the sixteenth century, which was uninterrupted "even in the course of colonization." A number of "individual Westerners" were "moved by the humanity of the 'natives,' by their moral and religious depth—especially in China and India."¹⁵ He expressed a special affinity to China, where he sensed a common source of humanity in contrast to the barbarism of Nazi Germany. Following the expulsion from his professorship in 1937, he and his Jewish wife became especially interested in China.

Jaspers exemplified mutual civilizational grafting chiefly through the relationship between the West and China. When Westerners went to China, Jaspers pointed out, they not only imparted their civilization to the Chinese, but they also learned from the Chinese.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie* (Berlin, Göttingen, Heidelberg: Springer, 1948), 692ff.

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom. An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 98 (henceforth cited as *WW*).

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Memoirs," *Philosophy and the World. Selected Essays and Lectures*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 297-298 [henceforth cited as *PW*].

¹² Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Freedom and Karl Jaspers's Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 91.

¹³ Oskar Köhler, "Das Bild der Menschheitsgeschichte bei Karl Jaspers," *Saeculum* 1 (1950), 483, 477.

¹⁴ Norbert J. Rigali, "A New Axis: Karl Jaspers's Philosophy of History," *International Philosophical Quarterly* X (1970), 456.

¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 73; also see 89 [Henceforth cited as *FM*].

Initially, the Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century immersed themselves in the strange faith of the Chinese "in order to learn from its exact knowledge the best ways of preaching Christianity"; They tried to find what Jaspers called, "a Chinese Christianity," that is, "Christian elements in the basic forms of the Chinese religion ... just as there had once been a Hellenistic one."¹⁶

Jaspers' cursory discussion of the sensitive Jesuit mission in China has been in the part supported by historical scholarship. The Jesuits' China mission began with Ricci, who adopted "Confucian ideas," communicating his moral philosophy and European Euclidean commentaries in perfect Chinese. After Ricci, Johann Adam Schall von Bell, a German Jesuit, also adopted many Chinese customs and tolerated Chinese rites. His knowledge of science brought him close to the Manchus' Shun-chih Emperor.¹⁷ Schall reached the high position of director of the Bureau of Astronomy, but due to a conspiracy by jealous Chinese astronomers, he was placed under house arrest (CC 18, 20-21). Ferdinand Verbiest, a Dutchman, who was placed under house arrest with Schall, was able to figure out "the exact time of a forthcoming eclipse of the sun" with the help of the stricken Schall before the latter's death in 1666. As a result, Emperor Kangxi, who became emperor in 1668, called him back. The emperor asked Verbiest to check calendars that were submitted by Chinese colleagues. When they were proven wrong, Verbiest was appointed as director of the astronomical bureau. He also tutored the emperor about the principles on astronomy and *the Elements of Euclid* (CC 24-29). At the time of Emperor Kangxi, the Jesuits thus reached an enormously influential position at the Imperial Place in Beijing, "a heyday of the mission" (WCH 259-262).

Emperor Kangxi himself gave an account of his many contacts with Verbiest and other Jesuits, as the following account by Jonathan Spence shows. (Spence employed an interesting writing style, as he wrote a historical study of the emperor by impersonating the emperor in the first person.) The emperor was a very passionate supporter of Western science and mathematics which the Jesuits brought to China, stating:

I realize, too that Western mathematics has its uses. I first grew interested in this subject shortly after I came to the throne, during the confrontations between the Jesuit Adam Schall and his Chinese critic, Yang Kuang-hsien.... Schall died in prison, but after I had learned something about astronomy I pardoned his friend Verbiest in 1669 and gave him an official position, promoting him in 1682.... In 1687 I let the newly-arrived Jesuit Fontaney and the others come to Peking.... and throughout the 1680s I discussed Western skills in Manchu with Verbiest, and I made Grimaldi and Pereira learn the language as well, so they could converse with me.

I ordered the Jesuits Thomas, Gerbillon, and Bouvet to study Manchu also, and to compose treatises in that language on Western arithmetic and the geometry of Euclid. In the early 1690s I often worked several hours a day with them.¹⁸

It is remarkable that the emperor of the most populous empire with more than two hundred million people could work on Western mathematics and science several hours a day! It clearly shows the emperor's fascination with Western science. Yet he simultaneously also tried to undermine its originality, saying Western mathematics derived from the *Book of Changes* and "the Western methods are Chinese in origin" (EC 74). This was, however, more likely due to perplexity in a rapidly changing world. Prior to this moment China was so "sure in her superiority," that it had "never dreamed that anything value might be found in the West" (CC 4).

Emperor Kangxi also showed openness towards Christianity, even though it was less than his openness towards Western science and mathematics. In 1692, Kangxi issued "an Edict of Toleration, in effect giving religious freedom to Christians in China." He tolerated Christianity for two reasons— "the missionaries' technical services" and "the Jesuits' accommodative efforts to comprehend and appreciate Chinese civilization."¹⁹ Thus the Jesuit accommodationist policy was largely responsible for their initial success. They tried to point out similarities between Western and Chinese traditions and tried to adopt Western Christianity into Chinese Christianity. They also tried to present Christian moral teaching as a kind of Western Confucianism. Such accommodationist policy made the conversion of some

¹⁶ Horst Gründer, *Welteroberung und Christentum. Ein Handbuch zur Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Gütersloher: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992), 259-60 [henceforth cited as WCH].

¹⁷ Jonathan Spence, *To Change China, Western Advisers in China, 1620-1960* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 19 [henceforth cited as CC].

¹⁸ Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China. Self-Portrait of Kang-Hsi* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 72 [henceforth cited as EC].

¹⁹ Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing. Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York, London: W W. Norton & Co, 1999), 75 [henceforth cited as SB].

Chinese possible, producing the first Chinese bishop in 1685.²⁰ In return, Jesuit missionaries saw the Chinese within the context of the Judaic-Christian tradition, either as descendants of Noah or as the rest of the lost tribes of Jews (*WCH* 260, endnote 7). Before the turn of the eighteenth century there were about 200,000 (*SB* 91) to 300,000 (*WCH* 259-262) Catholics in China.

The chances for a Chinese Christianity in the tradition of Ricci were lost, however, when new missionaries, Dominicans and Franciscans, took "the conservative-Eurocentric decision in the rites-debate" (*WCH* 273). The new missionaries' intolerance caused many converted Chinese to give up Christianity. Jaspers could only lament the fact that "the policy-makers of the Vatican blocked this way and put a stop to the creative Jesuit mission" (*WCH* 270-273). Emperor Kangxi's toleration of Christianity reached its limit due to the following papal actions. In 1705, the Vatican tried to establish its jurisdiction over Chinese Christians, which meant that Chinese Christians would owe partial allegiance to the Vatican, thus challenging the emperor's power (*SB* 75-76). The Vatican also promulgated two papal bulls in 1707 and 1715 against the Jesuit accommodation policy regarding ancestor worship and the sacrifice to Confucius. In the end, Kangxi called Europeans "smaller minds" or "ignorant Western fellows" (*EC* 76) for judging Chinese moral principles with insufficient knowledge. Thus "the main reason" for the decline of Christianity in China was "the debacle between Emperor Kangxi and the pope in the early eighteenth century" (*SB* 87). In terms of religion, the Jesuits in the end did not achieve much, despite their initial success.

In reviewing Jaspers' portrayal of the Chinese and Jesuit relationship in the light of historical scholarship, one can see his tendency towards idealization. Horst Gründer points out that the famous cultural adaptation and the toleration of missionaries was in reality "far less" than was generally thought. The Chinese sources, in particular, indicated a less generous tolerance of the ancestor cult on the part of the missionaries. Wolfgang Francke agrees with that interpretation: the educated Chinese did not change much through Christianity, but stayed in the Chinese tradition. Nonetheless, he points out the warm reception that Ricci received for his knowledge and personality, even when the Christian teaching was judged completely negatively.²¹

Yet these historians understate an important benefit which the Jesuits mission brought. As Waley-Cohen points out, the Jesuits "achieved much greater success" (*SB* 91) in spreading European culture, customs, and knowledge to Chinese. Also the Jesuits, Jaspers noted, became important agents of civilizational transmission from China to Europe when they were forced to return back to Europe. Out of their enthusiasm for Chinese culture, they started a new kind of missionary work, informing Europeans "about the Chinese faith, and about Chinese thinking" (*PW* 143-153). They were partially responsible for the popularity of Chinese thought and arts, called *chinoiserie*, in modern Europe. Their reports became "the basis of European thinking about China by such men as Leibniz, Voltaire, and Hegel." In addition to the earlier missionaries, the profundity of these religions was introduced by "humanist scholars, men imbued with a Biblical religious spirit and with a sense of the seriousness of alien faiths" (*FM* 73). Jaspers highly praised these Europeans who became missionaries for Chinese civilization.

Despite Jaspers' tendency to idealize the relationship between China and the West, thus downplaying the difficulties arising in the process of civilizational grafting, Jaspers' idea of civilizational grafting cannot be considered unhistorical, for its historicity has been supported by many examples of civilizational grafting, including, "Westernized Christianity," "Chinese Christianity," "Zen Buddhism," etc. Thus, one cannot apply objections regarding the Axial Age's lack of empirical evidence to Jaspers' universal history as a whole. Similarly, mutual civilizational grafting could refute the charge of cultural relativism.²² Jaspers instead demanded intense involvement and commitment between civilizations, even to the point of learning from each other, as it was exemplified by Verbiest and other Jesuits, and by the Emperor Kangxi. German historical thinking in the twentieth century, which was dominated by historicist thinking, tended to discourage active contact between civilizations. However, Jaspers provided a notable exception to it. Jaspers, who was influenced by German historicism, but avoided its excesses, did not forego civilizational continuity.

²⁰ Tilemann Grimm, "Unsere Erfassung des ostasiatischen Geschichtsprozesses," *Saeculum* 14 (1963), 49.

²¹ Wolfgang Francke, "Der Gegenwärtige Stand der Forschung zur Geschichte Chinas im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert," *Saeculum* 7 (1956), 421.

²² Paul Ricoeur compared Jaspers' Axial Period with the attitude of Don Juan. It shows that Jaspers did not flirt with other religions and civilizations, the way Don Juan did with women. Paul Ricoeur, "The Religion of Jaspers's Philosophy to Religion," *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, 638.