Discussion on papers presented in session IV

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In my discussion, I will highlight what I think is the common message in all these presentations. This session has been on “Contributions from Asia” but the papers presented here discuss something that is of relevance for all.

The contemporary times can be equated with death of ideology. Capitalism and materialism become an overriding force over religions long ago. The other major ideological force, communism, was finally defeated about a decade ago. Even the remaining socialist countries, most notably China and Vietnam, while trying to keep their political systems in tact have succumbed to the market economic forces. It seems the market forces riding over the carrier of globalization have conquered the whole world.

A consequence of death of ideology is that the whole world has turned into a place where the only sources of satisfaction and sense of welfare and fulfillment for most are wealth and consumption. The wealth of the countries as well as the individuals must therefore constantly grow (more than others) for them to have a sense of welfare/fulfillment.

Individuals, in order to be considered successful, must earn more than others, preferably all others. This has lead to a situation where a few hundred individuals own most of the world’s wealth. The flip side of earning is consumption, which is also on the rise, at least for some. There is no sense of welfare without owning material possessions and consumer items and without constantly changing them with newer models. But the problem is that the present day world culture of earning and consumption is socially and environmentally unsustainable.

The income disparity among the rich and the poor states has been and is sharply rising. The gap in income and wealth between the rich and the poor, both in the poor and the rich countries, is also sharply increasing. The culture of wealth and consumption is leading the rich countries and rich classes to become oblivious to the apathy of the poor. The Official Development Assistance (ODA) from rich to the poor countries is declining. The rich classes in poor countries are loath to their poor (whom they consider ignorant, immoral and supporting blatantly corrupt politicians).

In case of the environment, the unabated consumption and related waste has reached a point where it has started threatening the whole life support systems of the globe. The local, the regional as well as the global pollutants are on the rise. Even today the air quality even in the US\textsuperscript{1} cities is worsening. More than two billion Chinese and the Indians have been lead to abandon their restraint and have joined the club that finds

\textsuperscript{1} A recent report from the US Lung Association demonstrates that the air quality in the US cities is declining.
solace in wealth and consumption only. That may have disastrous consequences for the environment.

The arguments made above mean that finding welfare and meaningfulness in life through money making and consumption only is likely to lead us to both social and ecological disasters. The human race needs to move to a post-material stage and find some other means of the satisfaction and the sense of welfare. One place to look for such mechanisms is traditional cultures, religions and civilizations from Asia. And that is why we need dialogue of civilizations.

At present, the forces that are resisting the predominant culture (i.e. the culture of wealth and consumption only) are the forces of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and ethnicity. In their current form these forces are unaccommodating of others when it comes to the social interaction and negligent towards the issues of the natural environment altogether. Though they hold the potential to take the humanity to post-materialist stage, they cannot do that in their current form. A middle ground has to be found between the forces of modernity/westernization/consumerism and the forces of spiritualism. The three papers from Prof. Augustin BERQUE, Prof. Masayuki YAMAUCHI and Chandra MUZAFFAR argues for that. Prof. XIN on the other hand has outlined the conditions that are necessary for Dialogue of Civilizations.

Augustin BERQUE has discussed Kitaro Nishida’s concept of << overcoming modernity >> that in fact is a reversal of modernity leading to closure of cultural worlds on themselves. One of the main features of Nishida’s philosophy is <<logic of place>> which is essentially the logic of ethnocentrism. This logic is dangerous and is unaccommodating of others. This is in contrast with the Aristotle’s logic of identity, which can be perceived as foundation of modernity. According to Aristotle, the identity of a thing can be disconnected from its place. This logic is clearly unsustainable both socially and ecologically. Augustin argues that, to overcome the dead ends of modernity, we must combine the two types of logics, the identity of the subject, which we owe to Aristotle and the logic of place advocated by Nishida.

Prof. Yamauchi has also made an argument for combining knowledge from different civilizations. He would like to see a comprehensive education that absorbs the wisdom of India and Islam together with that of Japan, China and the West. He argues that seeing things in the same fashion, thinking in a uniform manner and lifestyles made standard will put to end on creativity in Japanese and other ethnic groups. Prof. Yamauchi talks of horizontal integration among cultures through mechanisms such as learning of languages among young. He would also like to see Eastern and the Western cultures complimenting each other.

Dr. MUZAFFAR informs us the history of dialogue among civilizations in Asia. He points out that during colonial times Asian countries were connected more with the
countries of colonial masters than with each other and that the situation is similar in the current era of globalization which has grown out of the colonial period. Dr. Chandra MUZAFFAR highlights the inequality arising from the current drive for globalization. He divides these inequalities or problems into three categories: economic, political and cultural.

Most of the economic activity in the world is under control of a few hundred companies. As a result there is little economic freedom left for the most. In political arena the democracy is stressed at the national level but not at the global level. The cultural globalization is causing various social problems in Asian societies. The reaction to these problems has been in the form of religious revivalism; Islamic revivalism in various Muslim countries, Hindu revivalism in India and Buddhist revivalism in Sri Lanka, to name a few. These movements are exclusive and communal and stress the symbolic dimensions of the religions. However, there are already some voices that are stressing the substantive dimension of religion. For these voices, in Muzaffar’s words, “justice and freedom, love and compassion, equality and integrity, modesty and humility, restraint and discipline are the essence of the faith”. This is what we can and should include in the mainstream culture of wealth and consumption.

Prof. Xin has, on the other hand, outlined the conditions that we need for the dialogue among civilizations. The first condition for this dialogue is viewing the world as a single entity in which fates of all are bound together. The second condition is recognizing that the unity of humanity is the unity in diversities. The third condition is need to create a friendly atmosphere of mutual understanding in which all sides taking part in the dialogue will respect each other, cherish good wills and adopt friendly attitudes towards each other. And the fourth condition for this dialogue is advocating tolerant and generous manner while making dialogue. XIN also highlights that dialogue of civilizations is essential as it is a source of new vitality from outside. He concludes “the experience of China shows that enhancing the dialogue and exchanges with foreign civilizations, learning and using the successful experiences from foreign nations for reference, and absorbing what is useful to itself will better develop its own civilization”.

The overall message that comes out of all these papers is: in order to be socially and ecologically sustainable we will have to find and adopt a new culture for fulfillment; instead of the current globalize culture of greed, consumption and waste. We have to make dialogue with other civilizations and accept what they have as alternative values in their fold.