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A Note on Comparative Studies in Human Geography

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1. INTRODUCTION

A positive attitude towards foreign culture is more or less common among internationally-minded human geographers. Many studies in human geography contain at least some cross-cultural comparisons of regions or cities in more than one nation, although this does not necessarily mean that the writers are actively involved in the progress of analytical and systematic comparative studies. The importance of a comparative perspective is often stressed for various reasons, such as checking the universality of models or theories or helping the student to understand the trends and mechanisms of regional change, but there still appears to be many problems involved in precise cross-cultural comparison. The aim of the present paper is to review those works which are concerned with a cross-cultural comparison of different regions or cities, and to discuss the problems involved.

2. COMPARATIVE STUDIES IN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Human geography emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a branch of classical geography, and in its early years was synonymous with cultural geography. Its establishment was largely due to the efforts of Friedrich Ratzel and his followers, who attempted a scientific description of the influence of the physical environment on man. Ratzel traveled throughout the world, and compared and contrasted the places he saw. In *The History of Mankind* (1896), he described and compared dress and weapons, houses and towns, architecture, economic life, farming, art and the nature of society in different cultural regions. His observations were detailed, but somewhat biased, because he regarded his own culture as the norm to judge others. For example, he commented on Japanese dress as follows :

The dress looks better on men than on women, since in the case of the latter the universal garment, the kimono, has to be so tightly tied in front as to allow only of a laborious, slightly stooping gait. Their appearance is not improved by the awkward high sandals, or rather clogs of elmwood ; and the projecting bow of the sash which masks the narrow hips, covering as it does the whole back, is rather grotesque than pretty.

This shows the subjective nature of Ratzel's work, although it offered an indispensable outline

sketch of non-Western cultures at that time.

Vidal de la Blache (1922) and Lucian Febvre (1922) criticized Ratzel's work as too deterministic on the ground that there was much counter-evidence. They argued that environmental influences upon the individual were indirect and mediated through social structure and ideas. la Blache, in particular, made an effort to be as objective as possible in his observation, and consequently his descriptions were less biased than Ratzel's, increasing the systematic clarity of cultural comparisons. He examined Western, as well as Asian and African, cultures very carefully, giving far more detailed and systematic accounts of population, land use, transporting and routes than Ratzel had done. Although he was later criticized for emphasizing the effects of the physical environment upon human phenomena, his basic principle is still valid. He said "...official statistics do not satisfy geographers. All parts of the earth's surface must be taken into account. Only in its entirety is the fact significant, because of the differences, the contrasts and the anomalies disclosed in such a comprehensive view." This fundamental principle of comparative geography seems to be understressed in recent years, due to the relative popularity of highly specialized work and the increased dependence of geographical works on official statistics.

Ellsworth Huntington was an American geographer, whose cross-cultural comparative study appeared a little after la Blache's work (Huntington, 1927, 1945). He wrote a detailed account of what he saw and felt on a cultural geographical world tour. His persisting concern was the explanation of the phenomena he observed, and his explanations tended to be based upon the principles of Darwinian natural selection. As an American, his values seem highly materialistic, at least to Japanese eyes, and he concluded that superior people lived in good and wealthy environments because they had been able to capture them through competition. Huntington claimed to have emphasised at least four criteria which had figured less prominently in the European schools : land utilisation, the changing quality of both human cultures and man's physical environment, the indirect action of the geographical environment especially through the process of selection, and the effect of the geographical environment upon health. Among these, the third criterion is the most prominent, and also the most controversial. However, the present paper focuses on the objectivity and relevance of regional descriptions and comparisons, and from this standpoint the first and second criteria are of more importance. There is a remark in *The Human Habitat* (1927), which exemplifies the objective element in Huntington's work :

The Japanese streets . . . seem unfinished to a European ; even in Tokyo there are only a few bits of sidewalk, and miles and miles of city streets show little hint of any plan to separate pedestrians and vehicles. The streets are dug up on every side and the majority are rough and have a disorderly look.

This is probably the first detailed remark on the sidewalk-less-ness of Japanese cities. There have subsequently been many references to this subject, but none of them has surpassed this remark of Huntington. There is no doubt that many Japanese cities have experienced drastic changes since Huntington's time, and the modern geographers should be prepared to show precisely what has changed, and where and how. With regard to the sidewalk-less-ness,

unfortunately, there have been only occasional, slight and superficial descriptions of the situation. The objective and descriptive elements in Huntington's comparative study should not be undervalued.

Whether deterministic or not, the classical human, or cultural, geographers seem to have had one common principle, i. e. a careful description of the 'factual forms on the earth's surface'. This point was particularly emphasized by the critics of geographical determinism. Though admitting the value of this principle, Brian Berry (1977) concludes that classical cultural geography has collapsed into atheoretical mapmaking and description. But whatever is said by the modern urban geographer, the classical human geographers are to be commended for their comprehensive observation and comparison of facts.

Some years after the publication of *The Human Habitat*, Tetsuro Watsuji, a Japanese philosopher, wrote *Fudo* (1935), a philosophical study of cultural climates. His motivation seems to have been similar to that of Western cultural geographers, and although his geographical views and knowledge were relatively limited, he showed a deep insight into the phenomena he observed. He did not consider the mere physical interaction of man and environment, but stressed the importance of historical and human factors on cultural-climatic phenomena. He traveled on a boat from Japan to Europe in 1927, and recognized three distinguishable cultural climatic types, i. e. monsoon type, desert type, and meadow type. His concern was not how to describe objectively what he saw, but how to perceive and understand them in a cultural-climatic context. Although it is not easy to prove or disprove some of his arguments scientifically, his work retains its popularity in Japan despite countless criticisms.

Watsuji and the Western cultural geographers shared one characteristic, i. e. they used themselves as a standard for cultural comparison. In any kind of precise comparison, a fixed scale is needed as a reference. To compare the length of two distant objects, a foot rule which does not change from one place to another would be needed. The problem is whether Watsuji and the cultural geographers were able to succeed in making themselves a fixed rule of cultural comparison. Moreover, it is almost inevitable that no two critics will lay equal stress upon corresponding aspects of contrasted cultures, because of their own different interests and opportunities (Sayce, 1938).

As a consequence of the decline of subjective cultural comparison, cultural geography came to emphasize a descriptive attitude, rather than an explanatory one. A book such as *Cultural Geography* by Spencer and Thomas (1969) is interesting in the sense that it shows the variety and diversity of human existence in different regions of the world, but as the differences are stressed, the similarities are largely ignored. A cultural comparison thus pursued tends to be superficial from an analytical point of view. It is comparable to describing the characteristics of chemical substances before the discovery of the periodic table. The understanding of the nature of substances was drastically increased when people found they all consisted of atoms, and these atoms are made up of protons, neutrons and electrons. Hence for a better understanding of different cultures, it would be necessary to clarify the common factors as well as the differences. There has been a rapid progress in the analytical methods and in scientific thinking, but they have not been sufficiently applied to the fields of cultural geography. It is

felt that cultural geography, if armed with modern analytical tools and ideas, could achieve a far better understanding of human conditions.

3. COMPARISON OF CITIES (in general)

Urban geography seems to be regarded by many modern geographers as central in human geography, at least in the West. Whether or not this view is right, urban geography has come to occupy an important position in human geography, and there are many comparative studies in it. R. L. Meier (1970) pointed out the necessity for two different dimensions of comparison for urban studies, i. e. the between-city dimension and the rural-urban dimension. He stressed the importance of comparative work when he was studying Hong Kong and other Asian cities, and commented as follows :

A city cannot be judged in the abstract. . . . it must be compared with other cities. Those cities might be itself at certain dates in the past, or they could be other cities with which it is competing in some way. Comparisons with non-city, i. e. the towns, villages and rural districts with which it is strongly linked, introduce an extra set of criteria for performance. Meier's suggestions are important and acceptable, but in the same article he demonstrated a strongly problem-oriented, policy-oriented and planning-oriented approach. As a result he did not present any general tool or language for comparison.

Peter Hall (1966), like many other urban geographers, wrote about some of the great cities in the world. However, he gave no more than a description of each, and did not contrast them in a systematic and effective way. Although he presented many interesting accounts which have their own value, his work cannot be regarded as truly comparative. It is unfortunate from an analytical point of view that so many urban and regional studies consist of non-systematic descriptions of individual city or region decorated by official figures which are often uncomparable from one place to another and seldom available for the detail of regional features.

4. COMPARISON OF CITY STRUCTURES

The comparison of the city structure seems to have been the most notable aspect of the comparative studies of cities. The classical models of city structure, i. e. E. W. Burgess's (1925) concentric zone model, H. Hoyt's (1939) sector model and C. O. Harris and E. L. Ullman's (1945) multiple nuclei model, have been central in many comparative studies of city structures. It has often been argued that these three models reflect the American city of the twenties and thirties only, and do not include factors which emerged later e. g. rapid motorization. However, as H. J. Nelson (1969) says, they still remain valuable conceptual tools for analyzing the modern city, and provide a basis for cross-cultural comparisons of cities. A crucial point for such cross-cultural comparisons is the specification of the zoning criteria being used, since a precise

comparison requires common ground. For instance, an American model based on a criterion of economic status is fundamentally not comparable with a Japanese model based on land use. Many comparative studies have been carried out to examine the applicability of these American models, and hence to seek a more universal reality of city structure, but so far these comparisons have mainly been concerned with the restricted criterion of socio-economic residential pattern.

Gideon Sjöberg, who presented the pre-industrial city model, was particularly eager to stress the importance of the comparative approach. In *The Pre-Industrial City : Past and Present* (1960) he criticized urban sociologists, most of whom, he believed, "have not perceived the generality of their findings, each being content to immerse himself in the culture of society that is his speciality." With this conviction, he searched for the general features of pre-industrial cities throughout the world and found that they displayed quite a different spatial arrangement from that proposed by Burgess. Sjöberg contrasted his model with Burgess's concentric zone model and showed a reverse arrangement of socio-economic groups, i. e. the elite being in the city's central area, with the poor towards the periphery.

Although Sjöberg discussed the socio-economic aspects of the residential pattern, most of the evidence he presented has been basically physical, e. g. the appearance of building structures. In a more careful study these aspects would have to be clearly distinguished. In some British cities, for example, hotel employees form the majority of residents in central areas, but the appearance of their residence, i. e. a hotel, may suggest what Sjöberg called 'upper-class residence'. A study based on occupational status would fail to confirm this. Moreover, Sjöberg failed to mention what precisely he observed and compared. For instance, he talked about the skyline of the city while referring to it as land use pattern.

Referring to the residential distribution of social classes, P. London and W. G. Flanagan (1976) suggested that Burgess's and Sjöberg's constructs stood at opposite ends of a hypothetical continuum so that any actual case could be assumed to fall somewhere in between them. This is related to a dynamic theory of a city structure, i. e. the theory that city structure changes through time, which is based on work in Latin American cities by T. Caplow (1949), the Dotsons (1956), L. F. Schnore (1972), and others. Among them, Schnore sought a generalization of city structures and presented *the revolutionary sequence hypothesis*. This stated that the traditional or colonial pattern, which was characterized by a pre-industrial status gradient, was in various stages of breakdown, with an apparent shift towards the North American pattern.

Although broad comparative studies of these kinds have been partially successful, they have been limited to a consideration of socio-economic residential structure, and the assumption has always been made that there is segregation of socio-economic classes. This segregation has not, however, been proved. Recent studies of Asian cities have increasingly revealed mixed patterns and also suggest that the degree of mixture may itself be increasing (Berry and Spodek, 1971, etc.). In Bangkok, for example, there is a mixed distribution of the very poor and the very rich in both the central and the outer areas. In such areas, socio-economic or any other patterns would have to be observed at a detailed scale in order to reveal whether any structure exists.

J. Langton's (1975) work exemplifies the recent attempt to check existing city-structure models by an intensive examination of a few selected variables. He checked Sjoberg's preindustrial city model and Vance's (1971) pre-capitalist city model by examining three 17th century British cities. He analyzed the hearth tax returns for all three cities and the admissions lists of freemen in one of them, the former as the indicator of wealth of each household, and the latter as the indicator of social status. He concluded that neither of the two models applied to the three cities he examined. However, he limited his research to the examination of the existing models, and did not seek an alternative. Langton's work belongs to those that emphasize complexity instead of simplicity, and individuality instead of generality, and does not offer a new model or method for a comparison of city structures.

5 . MULTI-VARIATE CITY CLASSIFICATION

Most of the comparative studies related to city classification were carried out at intra-national level, and little was done to extend them to international comparisons. It is difficult to extend a method developed in one country to other countries, since even basic factors such as the definition of the city or the nature and quality of population census data vary considerably from country to country. There are various purposes for city classification, but the simplest and probably the most important may be to identify the character of the city. Some cities have strong identities which are obvious to all, but others do not. The most common method in recent years is called functional classification, and multi-variate analysis is a frequently used tool to reduce complexity.

In Britain, G. A. Moser and W. Scott (1961) examined 157 towns with respect to 60 different variables. Their purpose was to classify British towns into a few relatively homogeneous categories, and to see whether such a classification would make sense. They used eight main categories of variables, i. e. population size and structure, population change, households and housing, economic functions and employment characteristics, social class, voting behaviour, health and education. The variables are not independent of each other, but interrelated in a way which is unique to a cultural region. Moser and Scott say that towns with a high proportion of heavy industry tend, on the whole, to have low social class, a substantial Labour vote, high infant mortality, and so on. But this will not necessarily be the case elsewhere, and this fact makes the international comparison even more difficult. Moser and Scott used factor analysis to simplify the classification. They distinguished four major factors, for each of which they gave a score to each town. For each factor the towns were then allocated to groups on the basis of their relative scores. There proved to be 14 groups, which fell into three major categories, i. e. i) resort, administrative and commercial centres, ii) industrial towns and iii) suburbs and suburban-type towns.

In America, Berry (1972) considered 1762 urban places with 97 variables. He also used a multi-variate method, and obtained 14 latent dimensions of variation in American cities, i. e. i) functional size of cities in an urban hierarchy, ii) socio-economic status of the city residents,

iii) stages in the family cycle of the city residents, and so on. What seems important here is that these latent dimensions are uncorrelated.

Similar works appeared elsewhere (Ahmads, 1965 ; King, 1966 ; etc.). Factor analytic methods seem to be useful for intra-national city classification. They could also be successfully applied at the international scale, if a suitable universal data base were provided throughout the world. Such an international comparison should be based on a set of carefully examined variables, if it is intended to be culturally significant. It may not be easy, however, since almost all city classifications are based on official data which are unique to each country. Moreover, a heavy dependency on official data tends to mean a strong emphasis upon socio-economic aspects. Therefore, works of this type may neglect important cultural aspects of cities. In addition, the description of a city as a whole may not be suited to a cultural comparison, since many cultural characteristics are recognizable only on a detailed scale. Studies in detail are likely to bring a new perspective to conventional city classifications, and may help to extend them to international comparisons.

6 . COMPARISON OF TOWNSCAPES (with reference to Masai's scheme)

Yasuo Masai, a Japanese cultural geographer, devoted his efforts to the cross-cultural comparative studies of cities and regions. He tried to view each region as a whole, and then picked out various elements one by one to make cross-sectional comparisons between different places. Many of the elements he compared are relatively common in ordinary regional geography, but others were introduced to strengthen the comparison of visual aspects. In *The Contemporary Japanese Townscape* (1970) Masai compared various features of Japanese townscape with those of the other countries, in order to trace the historic origin of each Japanese feature, as well as to clarify the characteristics of Japanese townscape in a cross-cultural context. Although his comparison was pursued on the city basis, his field survey went down to the scale of the individual household. As a townscape-minded geographer, he directed most of his attention to visual aspects, such as house-roof styles, height of structures, chromatic townscape, linguistic townscape, road pattern, and some consequences of land-use pattern. In his *Inter-Culture Table*, he took twenty elements observed in Japanese cities, and showed the prominence of each in ten different regions in the world. These elements included wooden houses, house floor on open stilts, low houses, rising buddhist temples, arboreous houses, sloping-roof houses, sliding-door houses, single homes with some terrace houses, greyish colour especially of roof tiles, quasi-gridiron streets, absence of city walls, urban sprawl, squatters (not significant), retail market places (not significant) , railway-station-oriented shopping areas, apparent existence of CBD, industrial (mfg.), mass transportation especially by railway, megalopolitanization, and recent war damage. Though rough and still at a relatively early analytical stage, this was a bold step towards a systematic comparison of various townscapes. In order to make the Inter-Culture Table even more effective from the standpoint of cross-cultural comparison, the following points are raised. Firstly, the classification of townscape

characteristics could be made more suitable for a cross-cultural comparison. For example, the category 'wooden houses' would have to be replaced by 'main material of house buildings', 'low houses' by 'height of houses', 'sliding-door houses' by 'type of house-entrance door', and so forth. Secondly, it would be favourable to make the classification more comprehensive, as the original is quite selective. The table tells what features are observed in Japanese cities, but it does not tell what are not. The latter aspect is as important as the former, and therefore Masai's table can tell only half of the story of townscape characteristics. If all major building materials, such as brick, concrete, or stone, as well as wood, are considered, the cross-cultural comparison would become more effective. Thirdly, the scheme includes cross-sectional comparison only, i. e. it cannot tell the interrelationships of the characteristics. For example, characteristics A and B may be observed in cities X and Y, and A and B are closely associated spatially in city X, while in city Y they are not. In a simple cross-sectional comparison, it is impossible to distinguish these two cities, because the only information obtainable from the table is that both variables are present. This is not a favourable situation, since cultural or regional characteristics are often evident only at this secondary stage of comparison, rather than at the first stage. Fourthly, the major terms used in the scheme, such as 'wooden houses', should be defined precisely. If there are no precise and operational definitions, right things may not be always grouped consistently.

In *Townscape—A Comparison by Major Cultural Regions in the World* (1977), Masai advanced farther towards a more universal comparison of townscapes. Although the variables remained much the same, he attempted to be more comprehensive in the coverage of each. He then sought for causal relations between the regional characteristics and climatic and historical factors. For example, he found many low buildings in East Asian, South-East Asian, Black African, Anglo American, Latin American, and Oceanian cities, and, after historical and environmental considerations, concluded that traditional Japanese townscape has a close relation with Malayan townscape and a weaker relation with Chinese one than had been thought till then. This kind of consideration is instructive from a cultural point of view. It seems that Masai's scheme, if the proposed points are integrated into it, would offer a valuable basis for a cross-cultural comparison of townscape. It would also be useful as a methodological framework for other kinds of comparative studies in human geography.

7 . CONCLUSION

Different groups of human-geographical studies have different characteristics that include both favourable and unfavourable elements for the advancement of cross-cultural comparative study. There seems to be lack of communication and understanding between these different groups, and it is obstructing progress in the field. It would be necessary for the modern analytically-minded geographers to review the detailed descriptions of places by the classical cultural geographers before discarding them as being too subjective. There is no doubt that subjective descriptions of places should be replaced by more objective, systematic, and analyti-

cal measures, if a precise cross-cultural comparison is desired. However, it is doubtful that analytically-minded geographers have really achieved a precise comparison. The increase of official data and the increased dependency on such data, which are usually too general from a cultural point of view and are also too culture-specific, seem to have pushed them far from truly cross-cultural comparisons. A precise cross-cultural comparison requires careful and systematic observation of facts, precise and universally-operational definitions of the items being observed, and a relevant analytical and conceptual framework for the comparison and interpretation of the obtained information.

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