

1 What Kind of Civilization? China at a Crossroads

Translator's Introduction

This rousing essay, published in 2013, serves as an excellent introduction to this volume and to Xu Jilin's work as a public intellectual. The broad theme addressed is that of civilization (in Chinese, wenming), a concept which, in East Asia as elsewhere, has generally been associated with "Western civilization" in the modern era. An important part of the Japanese effort to modernize and catch up with the West in the last nineteenth century, for example, fell under the slogan "bunmei kaika" – "reform and enlightenment"¹ where "civilization" (bunmei) is rendered as "enlightenment," referring of course to the "advanced" civilization of the West. In the May Fourth period, iconoclastic Chinese reformers like Chen Duxiu preached the universal values of French civilization as a way of condemning Chinese obscurantism. And when enthusiasm for Maoist revolution waned in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals relived the May Fourth movement and turned once again toward Western civilization as a solution to China's dilemma.

China's rise over the past few years has muddled these waters, as China's economic and growing military might have nourished a renewed self-confidence that Chinese civilization has returned, that it is finally China's turn to fashion its own mission civilisatrice. It is this self-confidence that Xu Jilin hopes to challenge in this text, ranging widely in time and space in an effort to remind his readers that world leadership requires more than an impressive GDP.

Xu insists that "modern civilization" is made up of at least two dimensions: the pursuit of wealth and power (via military might, capitalism, etc.), and the defense of values – which may not be universal, but which must be defended, openly and convincingly, in universal settings. Xu dissociates "modern civilization" from the West, arguing that even if modernity's origins are indeed largely Western, by now it is simply a new "axial civilization" which has spread throughout the world, functioning in a variety of political and cultural settings.

¹ Originally published as "Hezhong wenming? Shizilukou de jueze," *Xinrui* 2 (2013). Also available online at www.21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_2013082990878.html (August 29, 2013). On the *bunmei kaika* movement in Japan, see Marius Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), ch. 14. For the influence of the movement on China, see Doug Howland, *Borders of Chinese Civilization: Geography and History at Empire's End* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

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What China has so spectacularly mastered since the beginning of the reform era, Xu argues, is the “wealth and power” dimension of modernity, and if she has every right to be proud of her accomplishments, to have beaten the West at its own game, the larger game is not yet over. The larger game involves addressing the universal problems of modern civilization – excessive state power, income inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change – which are now as much China’s responsibility as anyone else’s. Instead of arguing that “China would be better if China were democratic like Western countries are,” Xu instead insists that “as part of modern civilization, China must join the world, defend its values, and make its contributions.”

Xu further sharpens his argument by highlighting the distinction between civilization and culture, a theme that appears repeatedly in this volume. Citing scholars of European history, Xu argues that civilization is universal and culture is local, civilization is about what is good and culture is about what is ours. When civilization – as wealth and power – runs roughshod over weaker countries, culture fuels a nativist reaction, as has happened in Germany, Japan, Russia, Turkey, China, and elsewhere. Yet Xu does not argue that culture should submit to civilization, but rather that culture should adapt universal values to local needs in such a way as to acknowledge the values of each. In this way, Xu manages to argue both that China must look inward to find the culture-appropriate values necessary to fill the current moral vacuum in Chinese society, and that the communitarian ethos that he hopes will emerge from that search can make a contribution to the variety of “universal” values that coexist in a multi-polar world.

Xu’s text is breathtaking in its range, and his citation of Western authors, from Octavio Paz to Isaiah Berlin to Slavoj Žižek, suggests his engagement with intellectual currents throughout the world (even if Xu speaks no foreign language well). At the same time, Xu’s grounding in Chinese history is obvious, and he manages to convey his erudition in a pleasing style that, to my American eye, reads like something out of the New York Review of Books or the Atlantic Monthly. He also manages, in a feat of considerable diplomacy, to ask his readers to reconsider the implications of China’s rise without dwelling overmuch on China’s shortcomings.

Beginning in the modern era, the Chinese nation has faced serious challenges from outside civilizations. Seventy years ago, the famous Chinese historian Lei Haizong (1902–62) made a penetrating remark to the effect that the outside enemies China had faced in the past either were like Buddhism, which had civilization but no power, or like the northern nomadic peoples, who had power but no civilization. Both of these, he said, were easy to handle. But the West that came with the Opium War possessed both power and civilization superior to those of China, which sparked an unprecedented civilizational crisis.²

China’s civilizational crisis, which has endured for a century and a half, remains unresolved today. Although twenty-first-century China has

² Lei Haizong, “Wubing de wenhua” (A non-military culture), in Lei Haizong, *Zhongguo wenhua yu Zhongguo de bing* (Chinese culture and Chinese military) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2001), p. 125.

engineered a rise in wealth and power so that its overall national might can rival that of the West, China's civilization has yet to rise. While "the reforms have entered deep water," civilizational choices are still "crossing the river by feeling the stones."³ And the worst is that we don't know where salvation lies. We are trapped in a civilizational maze, not knowing which flag to fly, which road to take.

In what direction will Chinese civilization develop? How will we rebuild the Chinese people's consensus on values and institutions? We will no longer find the answers to such questions by following an uncontested developmental strategy; economic development that detours around questions of civilization will only go around in circles, continuing to feel the rocks even in deep waters, while what we need is to identify our destination as soon as possible, and cross the great river of civilizational transformation.

Modernity: A New Axial Civilization

What is this great civilization that launched such a huge attack on China from the late Qing onward?

According to the Israeli scholar Shmuel Eisenstadt (1923–2010), a new kind of axial civilization gradually appeared in Western Europe in the sixteenth century, which we call modern civilization.⁴ Modern civilization evolved out of two ancient axial civilizations: Christian civilization and Greco-Roman civilization. It appeared first in Western Europe, and later spread rapidly throughout the world, so that the countries and peoples of practically the entire world fell into its clutches. Like the Mexican poet and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz (1914–98) said: we are all "condemned to modernity."

What is modern civilization? Much research has already been done and many explanations already exist. In this context, I want to distinguish two important dimensions of modern civilization: one is a modernity that is value-neutral; and the other is a civilization guided by a clear sense of values. The first has to do with wealth and power, and the second is a set of value systems and corresponding institutional arrangements. In the late Qing period, both Yan Fu (1854–1921), the late Qing scholar

³ Translator's note: "Crossing the river by feeling the stones" is how Deng Xiaoping pragmatically described China's transition away from a Soviet-style planned economy and toward an economy in which market forces play a more important role. The notion that "the reforms have entered deep water" means that they have moved away from the rocky river and into the deep sea; in other words, that great progress has been made.

⁴ See Aisenstat (Shmuel Eisenstadt), "Maixing 21 shiji de zhouxin" (Toward the axis of the twenty-first century), in Aisenstat (Shmuel Eisenstadt), *Fansi xiandaixing* (Reflections on modernity), Kuang Xinnian and Wang Aisong, trans. (Beijing: Sanlian shidian, 2006), pp. 79–80. This appears to be a collection of essays edited and translated by the Chinese, and not the direct translation of an existing work by Eisenstadt.

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and translator, and Liang Qichao (1873–1929), the late Qing reformer and founder of Chinese journalism, discovered two secrets about the rise of the West: one was wealth and power, and the other was civilization, which refer precisely to the two dimensions of Western civilization under discussion.

As for the modernity of wealth and power, this is expressed by any number of concepts: modernity, rationality, secularism, modernization, capitalism, etc. Even if the concepts are not the same, they share a common characteristic, a kind of value-neutral capacity and order that can produce the many types of modernity we find in today's world in alliance with different axial civilizations and ideologies. Concretely, the modernity of wealth and power can be divided into three dimensions. The first is the scientific techniques dealing with the material world. The wealth and power of domination created by the European sixteenth-century scientific revolution and the eighteenth-century industrial revolution swept away all obstacles and became invincible. In the twentieth century it took on new forms such as the revolutions in information technology, new energy technology, and biotechnology, all of which have advanced humanity's ability to transform and control nature and itself. The second dimension of modernity is rational order, or what Max Weber (1864–1920) called rational capitalism, impersonal systems of bureaucratic management, double-entry accounting systems, etc. This modern enterprise management system, on an increasingly universal basis, has successfully "colonized" society, establishing universal rules governing the realms of economic, cultural, political and even daily life. The third dimension of modernity is a secularized spiritual pursuit, the Faustian spirit described by Goethe (1749–1832), embodied in the unlimited liberation and pursuit of humanity's desires and the adventurous spirit that emerged from this, the insatiable pursuit of wealth and power and the work ethic of scrimping and striving. This capitalist spirit, without values, without religion, soulless, has its own rules of survival, believing that the strong win and the weak lose, that those who adapt live on. Market competition and the victories of the strong forcefully push human society forward.

This kind of technological modernity, focused on the attainment of wealth and power, has become a universal strength in today's world. Its face is ambiguous, it doesn't believe in gods and souls; all it worships is its own invincible power. It can join together with any secularized axial civilization: in addition to the original form of Protestant capitalism, today we have Confucian capitalism, Islamic capitalism, socialist capitalism, etc. It can also graft itself onto any kind of contemporary ideology, producing liberal modernity, socialist modernity, authoritarian modernity, etc. The

modernity produced by this neutral capitalism has become strong to the point that, as the Slovenian philosopher and social critic Slavoj Žižek (b. 1949) put it during the Occupy Wall Street movement: “You can criticize it, but you can’t find a mechanism to replace it.” In this world, where modernity and capitalism are everywhere, history has indeed come to an end from this perspective, and the “universal and homogenous state” feared by the Russo-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) has already emerged.

In addition to its core of modernity as wealth and power, modernity also possesses an even higher dimension, which is civilization. In the late Qing period, Yan Fu characterized it as “freedom in its essence, democracy in its function.” At the heart of what we call civilization is a set of modern Enlightenment values, based on respect for freedom and equality, which developed to become a modern faith in universal brotherhood, democracy, rule of law, etc., that can rival ancient religions. This Enlightenment discourse exists not only at the conceptual level, but also possesses corresponding institutional arrangements, the three central ingredients of modern political order as identified by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama (b. 1952): the modern state, rule of law, and accountable government.⁵ The reason why modern civilization has been able to conquer the world is not merely a matter of the material and rational strength of modernity; behind that is an even stronger civilizational discourse and legal-administrative system. Together, the two make up a new axial civilization, possessing a greater universal valence than that of ancient civilizations like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Modernity has become the discourse of mainstream civilization and the institutionalized form of civilization. Even if its origins are in the Christian civilization of Europe, in the process of its expansion, it has lost its exclusively European identity, and has become a universal civilization recognized by all secular civilizations, a world universal spirit that has transcended its original, particular civilizational background.

Yet modern civilization is not like iron. It is full of internal contradictions and tensions: rationalism versus romanticism, humanism versus technocracy, nationalism versus individual rights and dignity, developmentalism versus harmony, unlimited enterprise versus security and moderation ... These conflicts and dilemmas within modernity suggest that this new axial civilization will experience divisions and fractures in the process of its internal development and external expansion, which has indeed been the case in reality. The divisions in modern civilization have followed two

⁵ See Fulangsi Fushan (Francis Fukuyama), *Zhengzhi zhixu de qiuyuan* (The origins of political order), Mao Junjie, trans. (Nanning: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2012), p. 16.

different axes: one is ideology and the other is axial civilization. The division of modern civilization into different ideologies occurred at the end of the nineteenth century: liberalism, socialism, and conservatism. After two centuries of conflict and struggle these three political ideologies, through internalization and mutual absorption, have now become three model forms: American liberalism, European socialism, and Russian or East European authoritarianism, in addition to which there are many mixed forms. And in the course of the history of the twentieth century, a number of failed “anti-modern modernities” also appeared: German fascism, Soviet totalitarianism, Maoist agricultural socialism, etc.

Another path of division within modern civilization has developed around axial civilization(s). Although twentieth-century Western civilization thoroughly conquered the entire world, trampling virtually every tribe, race and country underfoot, assimilating any number of lesser religions and civilizations and their national customs and local habits, nonetheless the conquest of ancient axial civilizations was less thorough, whether Islam, Hindu, or Confucian. Indeed, wherever Western civilization reached, it provoked an extreme resistance on the part of these great axial civilizations, so that conquest and anti-conquest, assimilation and anti-assimilation occurred together at the time of civilizational encounters. Modern Western civilization did greatly influence the ancient axial civilizations, forcing them toward secularization and Europeanization, but from another angle, those non-Western countries that succeeded in internalizing Western civilization also succeeded in separating modern civilization from its source, Christianity, and grafted it onto its own civilization and traditions, creating non-Western forms of modern civilization. As a result, in the latter half of the twentieth century, following the rise of East Asia, India's development, and the revolutions in the Middle East, many changes occurred within modern civilization, and modernity no longer belongs exclusively to Christian civilization, becoming instead a plural modernity that could be integrated with different axial civilizations, or even local cultures.

The plural nature of modernity did not change the unified state of modern civilization, which continued to exhibit the two dimensions mentioned earlier as universal characteristics – wealth and power on the one hand, and civilization on the other. The difference was that it existed no longer as a uniform, essentialized form, but rather in a form that recalls the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) “family resemblances.” Universal modern civilizations are like members of a lineage, in that they look like one another, but do not share the same essence. By modern civilization we mean a set of values that includes wealth and power, rationality, happiness, freedom, rights, democracy,

equality, universal brotherhood, harmony, etc. According to the views of Isaiah Berlin (1909–97), these values are not internally harmonious; there are frequently conflicts among them. Consequently one must choose among the various modern values. Different peoples, different individuals have different understandings about the priorities to accord to certain values. The reason that there are different modernities in the contemporary world is because they prioritize and understand values in different ways. England and America emphasize freedom and the rule of law. The European continent chooses equality, democracy, and social welfare, while East Asia emphasizes development, wealth, and power. Yet if we say that all are modern, it is because they have adopted most of the set of modern values, which means that they share this “family resemblance.” Modernities thus differ in quality, and some are better than others. When a country’s modernity accords too much importance to a particular value, for instance paying attention only to national wealth and power, so that citizens lack guaranteed basic rights; or if there is democracy but no corresponding legal order, so that corruption and bribery are rampant; or when society has achieved equality, but continues to struggle amid widespread poverty ... None of these is a good example of modernity, or we could say that they are deformed sorts of modernity that lack the component of universal civilization.

So, what sort of modernity is symbolized in China’s rise?

Will China Resist, Pursue, or Develop Mainstream Civilization?

China’s rise since 2008 is a fact acknowledged by the entire world. The question is: what kind of rise is this? What kind of modernity has appeared? We have already mentioned the two secrets of Western civilization discovered by Yan Fu and Liang Qichao in the late Qing. In the eyes of many Chinese, wealth and power were most important and civilization could wait. So for a long period, wealth and power took precedence over civilization, and the attitude of Chinese people toward modern civilization was to pay less attention to universal civilizational values and the corresponding system of rule of law, and more to the technical side, the non-value-related aspects of science and technology, the rational order and the capitalist spirit. After a century and a half of hard work, the China Dream finally became a reality. But only half of the dream was actually realized, and China’s modernity remained incomplete. Wealth and power “rose up,” but civilization remains lost in a haze.

The secret of China’s rise from a civilizational perspective was to “beat the foreigners at their own game,” taking the skills of rationality and

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competition and the thrifty spirit of Protestantism, by now in decline Europe, and integrating these into China's Confucian secular statecraft tradition, thus developing an extreme personality type in which contemporary Chinese are more "Western" than Asian, possessing a Faustian, inexhaustible, enterprising spirit. The laws of competition of modern civilization have moved from Europe to East Asia. Chinese today are like nineteenth-century Europeans, bursting with ambition, industrious and thrifty, full of greed and desire; they believe that the weak are meat for the strong and that only the apt survive – they are vastly different from traditional Chinese, who prized righteousness over profit and were content with moderation. What kind of victory is this? A victory for Chinese civilization or for the Western spirit? Even when, in a not-too-distant future, China's gross domestic product surpasses that of the United States and China becomes the world's superpower, Westerners will just laugh: "Your power conquered us, but our civilization conquered you, and it was the obsolete, most detested nineteenth-century spirit that carried out the conquest!" So even when China controls the world, the final spiritual victory goes to the West. If we insist on talking about a victory for Chinese civilization, then it would not be the civilization of the Confucian literati, but rather that of the Legalists⁶ with their lust for powerful countries and strong armies.

Even while China's GDP has grown ever greater, and China has become the world's factory with which no one can compete, her internal civilizational crisis has grown ever more serious. The people have lost their core values, society's ethical order is a mess, the political system faces challenges to its legitimacy, the government has lost its authority and credibility, the rule of law exists in name only ... The crisis of civilization and the country's achievement of wealth and power make for ironic contrasts and leave the people dismayed. We're like Japan in the nineteenth century, and what we're seeing is the report card of a student that copied Western civilization. It's the report card of a seriously unrounded student.

Confronted with the reality of China, China's intellectual world has responded with two extreme, completely different points of view. One is that of "universal values," and the other is that of the "China model." From the point of view of universal values, our world has only one path

⁶ Translator's note: The Legalists were a group of political thinkers on the eve of the establishment of China's first unified empire in 221 BC who stressed the utility and the power of laws to direct popular behavior to follow the desires of the ruler. Although later denounced by Confucians as immoral, Xu and many other modern historians argue that Legalist techniques of rule maintained their importance throughout the history of "Confucian" China.

toward modernization, that demonstrated by the West, the one correct path toward modernity proven by world history since the sixteenth century. From this perspective, China's current problem is that she has not studied the West sufficiently, and the reforms implemented to date are no more than those of the "Foreign Affairs movement," the half-hearted Westernization efforts of the late nineteenth century, which means that China needs to become completely Western in terms of universal values and political systems. The argument of the China model, the complete opposite of this, insists that China's success illustrates precisely that there is no need to imitate the West, that China can have its own path to modernity, its own civilizational values. China has a unique political system that accords with China's national situation, and China's rise will in the future serve as a model for undeveloped countries. Even if China abandons Western civilization, she will nonetheless achieve national wealth and power.

Hence we find ourselves before a very pointed question: in the context of modern civilization in today's world, will China resist mainstream civilization, or pursue it? Or is there a third road?

To answer this question, we must first make a conceptual distinction between civilization and culture.⁷ The French philosopher Edgar Morin (b. 1921) pointed out that "Culture and civilization form two poles: culture represents uniqueness, subjectivity, individuality; by way of contrast, civilization represents transmissibility, objectivity, universality." Taking Europe as an example, European culture and European civilization are not the same: "European culture's unique heritage is based on Judeo-Christian values, on Greece and Rome, but after the spread of European civilization's characteristics of humanism, science and technology throughout Europe, it came to be rooted in places with completely different cultures."⁸ In other words, civilization refers to the common values or nature of all humanity, while culture focuses on differences between peoples and the unique features of a group. The expression of civilization is comprehensive, and can be material, technical, or systemic, and also includes a set of universal values. Culture must in contrast be a spiritual state; culture is not interested in the abstract "person's" existential value, but instead in values created by a particular people or group. Clearly, from the point of view of civilization and culture, "universal values" versus "the China model" is a war between universal civilization and a particular culture. This war has already occurred many times

⁷ Translator's note: Xu pursues this distinction in a more scholarly fashion in Chapter 7.

⁸ Aidejia Molan (Edgar Morin), *Fansi Ouzhou* (Penser l'Europe), Kang Zheng and Qi Xiaoman, trans. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2005), p. 31.

over in the course of the twentieth century, the two most representative examples being Germany and Turkey. The Germans hoped to use national willpower and a unique culture to resist the universal civilization of England and France, and the Turks sought to use Western civilization to replace Turkey's particular culture. These extreme examples provide us with deep historical lessons.

In the nineteenth century, when English and French thought arrived in Germany, the German intellectual elite used German culture to resist Anglo-French civilization. As Georg Iggers (b. 1926), the well-known German-American scholar of European intellectual history, has pointed out: "The cultural war between German *Kultur* and Anglo-Saxon *Zivilisation* enabled the German elite to fashion an ideology to consolidate their ruling power over the German masses. The German concept of '1914' is radically different from the French concept of '1789.'"⁹ The "spirit of 1914" was the special expression in history and culture of Germany's decision to resist Anglo-French universal civilization. From Bismarck to Hitler, as Germany raced to catch up with England and France, the strategies employed consistently deployed the special character of German will to resist Anglo-French universal civilization. In their efforts to pursue national wealth and power, they were more English than the English, more French than the French, and in less than a century, transformed a divided, backward, feudal country into a unified, strong Germany capable of dominating Europe. However, the particular path that Germany pursued in opposition to mainstream European civilization was a path that led to war, and thus was a dead end with no future. After World War II and a period of painful national reflection, the German people decided to enter world mainstream civilization, combining Anglo-American/Anglo-Saxon political civilization with Germany's own Lutheran tradition and modern social democracy in the contemporary German model that successfully synthesizes divergent elements of Western civilization. At present, Germany is the sole exception to a European economy that is in deep recession, and the source of hope that might lead Europe out of the deep valley and toward new growth.

German history tells us that resisting mainstream world civilization is the wrong path, leading to self-destruction. If the proponents of the China model only want to imitate the West to obtain wealth and power, while in terms of civilizational values and institutions they cling to their own "unique" culture, then even if they succeed in creating a unique

⁹ Geoerge Yigeersi (Georg Iggers), *Deguo de lishiguan* (The German conception of history), Gu Hang and Peng Gang, trans. (Nanjing: Yilin chubanshe, 2006), p. 3.