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Title: China’s Discourse of “Civilization”: Visions of Past, Present, and Future

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In early 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping gave a speech at a domestic national security seminar in which he boldly stated his aspiration to have China take on leadership of a new global order in a “post-Western era.” In this speech, he used the word “civilization” or “civilized” (wenming) three times: once to refer to China’s “great civilization of 5,000 years” (a phrase with which any China-watcher will be familiar), once to describe the common aspiration of all people for “the light of civilization,” and once as a stand-in for the idea of human progress, when he noted that “the more developed human beings and the more civilized the world are, the higher the demand for fairness and justice will be.” Given the length of the speech, the concept of “civilization” did not have a particularly prominent role in this instance; but in his usage of it, Xi was following in a long line of Chinese thinkers and leaders who have argued for nearly two centuries about the nature of “civilization” and the role that it has played in China’s international situation and standing.

This raises the question: when Xi Jinping, or other Chinese leaders, use the word “civilization,”what are they talking about? This essay argues that the concept of “civilization” has long been a lens through which Chinese thinkers and leaders make claims about China’s global status and aspirations in the past, present, and future. By examining how Xi, and his predecessors both within and prior to the inception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), have used this term, we can shed light on his assessment of China’s present and the prospects for its future.

Multiple meanings of “civilization”

In public speeches and writings, Xi Jinping (like his predecessors) has used the term “civilization” in at least three different ways. None is, in itself, unique to Xi or even to China. The first use of “civilization” most closely approximates the notion of a “society” or a “people”: that is, a relatively stable group of human beings tied together by a common geography, language, and history over a long period of time. By this definition, the world contains a multitude of civilizations at any given time, and human history is, to a large extent, the story of the ever-changing relationships among these many civilizations. China’s civilization in this sense is one of the longest-lasting in human history—with an unusually high degree of political centralization and unity—and was the dominant civilization in its region for much of its history. When Xi Jinping chided Donald Trump in 2017 about his knowledge of Chinese history, saying that, although ancient Egyptian civilization arose slightly earlier, “the only continuous civilization to continue onwards [into the present] is China’s,” he was referring to this concept of civilization.

A second meaning of “civilization” is very similar to the term “culture” (wenhua). This use of “civilization” refers to a unique set of practices, values, and collective mindsets that make one group of people fundamentally different from others. The content of a society’s “civilization” in this sense may shift over time, as that society’s values and practices change in response to broader historical change. The term “Chinese civilization” in this case may refer to “traditional” philosophical schools of thought such as Confucianism and Daoism and their associated rites and social norms, and to the economic and political organization that accompanied China’s dynastic monarchy; or it may refer to the “socialist civilization” that the CCP promised to bring to the Chinese people by creating new Chinese forms of economic, political, social, and ideological organization.

The third meaning of “civilization” refers not to a specific, historical grouping of people, but to a process of human development. Historically, Chinese elites distinguished the “civilized” Chinese from their “barbarian” or “foreign” (yi) neighbors, as a way of differentiating, and asserting the superiority of, their culture from that of the peoples surrounding them. In the 19th century, however, Chinese elites began to understand this concept in a new light, drawing on Western writings that focused on “civilization” as a dynamic process by which some human societies progress through history while others are left behind. As understood by thinkers such as François Guizot, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Huxley, “civilization” in this sense describes a mode of being that is progressive, dynamic, and aspirational, and that stands in contrast to “uncivilized” societies that are characterized by stagnation and passivity.

This meaning of “civilization” has several important characteristics. It is normative, in that a civilized society is superior to an uncivilized one; it is hierarchical, in that many versions of this line of thought assert that a civilized society will naturally dominate the uncivilized; and it closely links a society’s internal or psychological characteristics—such as future-orientation, ambition, competitiveness, and heterogeneity—with its ability to compete externally with other human societies. Being “civilized” was viewed as a threshold for full membership and status in the global arena. China’s entire modernization project, from 1840 to today, can be viewed as a quest to become “civilized” in this third sense of the world—that is, to reorient its internal characteristics in such a way to guarantee its national strength, self-determination, and influence in the global arena.

Chinese scholars and statesmen have long used all three of these meanings of civilization, to varying degrees, as a measuring stick for China’s progress, domestically and internationally, from its nadir point during the “century of humiliation.” In the rest of this essay, I show how Chinese thinkers’ discourses of civilization create several interrelated comparisons that shape their views of China’s place in the world: the relationship of China’s present to its past; the comparison between China and other nation-states or civilizations today; and the path between China’s present and its future.

Judging the present, reshaping the past

Many Chinese leaders have declared that China’s past has shaped its present, but it is just as much the case that Chinese assessments of the present shape their evaluation of the past. In the case of “civilization,” Chinese thinkers’ views of the relationship between past and present need to be read against the overarching narrative of Chinese history since China’s humiliating defeat in the first Opium War: the quest to regain standing in the global arena as a strong, modern, and self-determining nation-state. As Chinese intellectuals and statesmen in the 19th century debated the way forward for a shattered and weak nation, they primarily investigated whether China’s ancient civilization, its history and culture, could provide a foundation for a “civilizing” modern China.

Rejecting China’s past

For many, the answer was no. Scholars such as Liang Qichao in the late Qing period argued that since China had failed in its competition with Western nations, its internal characteristics must require transformation. Liang and many others drew on Western-originated views of “civilization” to conclude that ancient Chinese philosophies that valued harmony and quiescence had resulted in a passive, ossified culture that stood in direct contrast to the “vigorous” or “active” characteristics of the victorious West. Indeed, said some, it was Western nations’ advanced state of “civilization”—evident through habits of mind and society such as rationalism, efficiency, and orderliness—that set them apart from, and enabled them to dominate, societies that did not share these qualities. As Liang Qichao wrote in his 1900 essay “Young China,” because European civilization was “in the prime of life,” China had “allowed Europe to rule the whole world.” By contrast, he wrote: “We [the Chinese people] are four hundred million strong, yet we are the slaves of [ancient] records and annals … We are a country of people waiting to die.” Although traditional China had a very advanced “civilization” in terms of a long-lasting, shared culture, he said, this culture did not enable China in the modern era to become a “civilized great state (wenming daguo).” According to this view, China’s traditional values were so antithetical to the civilizing process that they needed to be jettisoned entirely if China were to progress.

Early CCP leaders took a similar view of China’s past. For the CCP, ancient “feudal” and “imperialist” traditions stood in the way of establishing a “socialist civilization” and “revolutionary culture” that would eventually spread to the whole world. When the Party announced its intention to “destroy the four olds” at the opening of the Cultural Revolution, it demanded that the Chinese people purge “old things, old ideas, old customs, and old habits” because these “four olds” had “poisoned the minds of the people for thousands of years” at the hands of the “exploiting classes.” The only way to replace these with “entirely new proletarian customs and habits” was to eliminate the material, philosophical, and social habits that underpinned “traditional” Chinese civilization. Thus, although Qing reformers and Maoist revolutionaries had very different visions of the future they hoped to bring China into, they reached similar conclusions about how to get there: China could only become “civilized” by shedding its Chinese past.

Embracing China’s past

By contrast, in recent decades, the CCP attitude has swung far in the other direction, elevating and even glorifying China’s past. Now the “traditional” values of China’s ancient civilization are celebrated as a source of national strength and an essential element of China’s present success. One author notes that the door was opened for this rehabilitation of China’s ancient civilization in 1996 when the CCP Central Committee, under Jiang Zemin, issued a set of “Resolutions Concerning a Certain Number of Important Questions Regarding the Strengthening of the Building of Socialist Spiritual Civilization.” These resolutions declared that China’s “fine national culture” (youliang guojia wenhua) and “revolutionary culture” (geming wenhua) were both important sources of China’s “socialist civilization,” and noted that the question of “how to carry forward the traditional cultural quintessence of the motherland” was a critical “historical question” for the CCP. Hu Jintao, China’s next leader, drew explicitly from ancient Confucian language to create his concept of a “harmonious world,” and Xi Jinping—who has been extremely active in promoting the value of ancient Chinese culture—essentially raised “traditional” culture to the same or nearly the same status as socialist civilization when he said that “to cultivate and disseminate the core socialist values we must take traditional Chinese culture as the base.”

In this retelling of Chinese history, CCP leaders draw a direct link between China’s ancient civilization and its ever-growing current-day material power and international status. Their greater confidence in China’s present allows them to revise their narrative of the past. Thus, Xi could say, in late 2017, that what has allowed China to “stand up” and “what has been supporting the Chinese civilization for more than 5,000 years are the cultural genes that have been deeply rooted in the blood of the Chinese nation.” In so doing, Xi and his predecessors have reclaimed the label of “civilization” for ancient China.

A particularly striking example of this change in perspective is seen in Xi’s 2014 speech to the College of Europe in Bruges, where Xi asserted that China and Europe should approach one another as “major civilizations” of equal weight and merit: “China represents in an important way the Eastern civilization, while Europe is the birthplace of the Western civilization.” Where Liang Qichao had fretted that China’s traditional way of life did not deserve to be called a civilization at all, Xi argues that Chinese civilization—both ancient and modern—is equivalent to that of any other. Moreover, Xi’s insistence on the equality of civilizations openly rejects the hierarchical and competitive vision that 19th century thinkers had of the relationship among civilizations: “All human civilizations are equal in value, and they all have their respective strengths and weaknesses … No single civilization can be judged superior to another.” Of note, Xi’s assertion that China—rather than other Asian nations—is the proper representative of “Eastern civilization” still allows him to maintain a hierarchy of nation-states within this civilization.

The shift in China’s global status allows Xi to reevaluate traditional Chinese civilization not only in relation to Western civilization, but also in relation to China’s own socialist aspirations. Xi has essentially done away with the inherent contradictions between CCP ideology and China’s traditional culture, by denying that they ever existed. Hence, in a speech for Confucius’ 2565th birthday, Xi asserted that “Chinese communists are neither historical nihilists, nor cultural nihilists… The Chinese communists have always been faithful inheritors and upholders of the country’s fine cultural traditions.” While this line seems laughable against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution and other mid-century CCP campaigns, it is consistent with the idea of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”: rather than aspiring to a universal “socialist civilization,” China has created its own, culturally specific version. China’s increasing material success means it can now claim that its “civilizational” past has helped rather than hindered it on its path toward achieving its long-standing desire for national rejuvenation. Indeed, Xi asserts that Chinese civilization has created such a successful model of development that it can serve as the foundation for a “community of common destiny” to which China will lead its regional and global neighbors.

Many observers have noted that Xi’s rehabilitation of China’s traditional culture is selective, tightly controlled, and often at odds with outsiders’ views of history. But the fact remains that these leaders have made China’s past available as a source of national pride, and as a statement that China’s “civilized” future need not take the same path as Western civilizations have done.

Visions of China’s future

If recent discourse on the nature of Chinese civilization illustrates confidence in China’s present international status, what do they say about Chinese leaders’ visions of the future? On the one hand, CCP leaders make statements about the nature of Chinese civilization to assert that China is uniquely positioned to create a new kind of future—not just new for China, but for all humankind. On the other hand, their continued emphasis on the need for the Chinese people to become ever more civilized suggests that they believe China still falls short in ways that are critical to its ability to step into this role. In other words, the question of whether China should lead the world into the future is not in doubt; but the question of whether the Chinese people are prepared to do so is more contested.

China’s civilized past as pathway for a new kind of global future

Although, as discussed above, Xi and Hu Jintao both expressed their belief in the “equality” of civilizations, they have simultaneously claimed that China’s civilization makes it uniquely capable of taking a leading role in the future of humankind. In so doing, they reveal a very different view of the nature of Chinese civilization than many of their predecessors had. Many of the late Qing scholars who argued that China’s past had ill-equipped it for their present took an equally dim view of its ability to carry them into the future. As one author has argued, many of those thinkers viewed “civilization” as a universalistic, single-track process: there was only one way to become civilized, and that was to follow the path of the successful West. Hu and Xi, on the other hand, follow in the footsteps of other Chinese thinkers who argued that China need not follow the same path as Western nations, by declaring that China’s unique culture is of equal merit to other civilizations and that this creates a new path to modernization with special “Chinese characteristics.”

Hu and Xi take this claim one step further, saying not only that China can forge its own path to the future, but that it can better forge all humankind’s path to the future. According to these leaders, China’s historical preference for social harmony creates a “peace-loving orientation” that “remains China’s basic idea in handling international relations.” It is this unique historical legacy, they claim, that allows China to envision a global future different from what has been achieved before or even imagined by Western nations that are mired in 19th century notions of competition and hierarchy. As Xi proclaimed in his 2017 speech at the national security seminar, “the old idea that winners take all is outdated.” Rather, he said, China’s “great civilization,” with its emphasis on “the development of equality” and its long-standing interest in “fairness and justice,” mean that it “has always stood at the moral summit.” As a result, “China is qualified to be a leader” that can “guide the international community to jointly build a more just and reasonable new world order.”

The claim that China is the only nation that can take on this task was recently highlighted by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who said:

“Since its founding, our party [the CCP] has closely combined both the wellbeing of the Chinese people and the wellbeing of the people of the world, and has been aware of the importance of the spirit of internationalism. This is the important distinction between our party and the political parties of other nations… It originates from the profound heritage of [Chinese] traditional culture. The Chinese nation has a long history of more than 5,000 years. It has created a brilliant Chinese civilization, formed a peaceful ideal of universal love, anti-aggression, benevolence, and good-neighborliness, a harmonious concept of valuing peace and harmony in diversity, and a keen sense that the greatest ideal is to create a world truly shared by all. These unique cultural values nourish the roots of China’s diplomacy concept and cultivate the Chinese wisdom for dealing with contemporary international relationships.”

Preparing the Chinese people for a global leadership role

Despite this confidence that China’s “brilliant civilization” will allow it to take on a leading global role, China’s leaders continue to promote domestic “civilization” campaigns and to admonish the people and the Party to improve themselves, suggesting that they believe that the Chinese people are still inadequately prepared to take on this role.

These campaigns remind us that in post-1949 China, the term “civilization” has often become a stand-in for the Chinese government’s concept of “reform.” A civilization campaign creates “an ideological and moral imperative” presented to the Chinese people as essential for meeting the CCP’s modernization goals. Hence Jiang Zemin’s Socialist Spiritual Civilization campaign emphasized the need to create and coordinate “civilizing” activities at all levels of society, and these activities have continued under subsequent leaders. One writer has identified at least four types of “civilization” to which CCP leaders aspired between the 1980s and 2008: material, spiritual, political, and social. To these have been added “ecological civilization,” “internet civilization,” and others. The rather mundane nature of some of the “civilizing” activities covered by these campaigns is indicated by examples such as an annual contest among Chinese cities to gain the “National Civilized City” award, or the campaign to improve China’s public toilets, which Xi has called “an important part of pushing urban and rural civilization.”

Viewed from this perspective, the target of a civilizing campaign may be seen to indicate particular areas that Party leadership has identified as obstacles to China’s reform process, and more recently to its preparation to take on its new global role. The obstacles presented in these campaigns are of two kinds. The first is internal: Concerns that the Chinese citizenry do not have the appropriate mindsets to follow Party guidance or to look to the public good are obvious in campaigns that focus on the “spiritual civilization” of the Chinese people or members of the Party, admonishing them to change their ways of thinking and reinvigorate their commitment to Party goals.

The second obstacle to China’s global leadership is external: the possibility that the outside world may not believe that China is ready to take on the international role that Chinese leaders have now assigned to it. This aspect of civilization campaigns focuses on external image. One author describes the way that this concern was on display during the lead up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. As the host, China could say that it “had gained international recognition by joining an elite group of nations selected to host the … Games.” But Chinese leaders also expressed concern that the behavior of ordinary Chinese citizens might reflect badly on their country and cast doubt in the minds of other nations whether China was ready for this role. As one newspaper put it, “What kind of capital do we want to show to the people of the world?” Hence, campaigns to improve a wide range of public behaviors were orchestrated to “demonstrate to domestic and international audiences that Chinese civilization had ‘made it.’”

In a 2014 speech on “core socialist values,” Xi Jinping spelled out his definition of success in the international arena:

“China has stood up. It will never again tolerate being bullied by any nation… Why are we so confident? Because we have developed and become stronger. China has won worldwide respect with its century-long efforts. Its prestige keeps rising, and its influence keeps expanding. Today’s China forms a sharp contrast to China in the 19th century when the country was humiliated, its sovereignty was infringed upon, and its people were bullied by foreigners.”

According to Xi, it is strength, “worldwide respect,” prestige, and influence—that is, externally-conferred markers of status—that have instilled a sense of confidence that China can stand up against other nations and reclaim the label of a “great civilization.” Campaigns that help elicit this global respect, prestige, and influence are thus critical to his project of moving China onto center stage.

Implications for today’s China

From this examination of Chinese uses of the term “civilization,” we can draw some conclusions about the aspirations and concerns of China’s leadership. One is that, as China’s leaders have grown increasingly confident that China is drawing closer to “national rejuvenation” that will enable it to regain the central role in the global arena that it had lost 170 years earlier, they can be more confident about drawing on Chinese “traditional” civilization without undermining Chinese socialism. Hence, Xi Jinping asserted in 2017 that “Our country’s underlying values hold greater appeal than ever before… We, the Chinese people, have greater confidence in our own culture. China’s cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture have increased significantly.” Civilization campaigns point out issues that still stand in the way of attaining these goals, but they also suggest that the goals themselves are not out of reach.

A second conclusion is that the constant striving for internal self-improvement marks China as having long since attained the status of a “civilized” nation as it was understood in the 19th century. “Civilization” in that sense of the word declares that its process, by its very nature, can never be completed; to stop moving forward or striving for a better future would indicate the complacent mindset that characterized “uncivilized” nations. From this perspective, Chinese leaders could argue that their recognition of the incompleteness of this process, together with what Xi has called “the wisdom of China’s civilization,” is precisely what will allow China to rule the world differently from all other “great powers” before it—to become not only modern, but a better kind of modern. In this telling, it is China that is the civilized nation, and the “outdated” West that is the laggard.