

# 1 What Kind of Civilization? China at a Crossroads

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## 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"<sup>1</sup> 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 muddied 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.*

<sup>1</sup> Originally published as "Hezhong wenming? Shizilukou de jueze," *Xinrui* 2 (2013). Also available online at [www.21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article\\_2013082990878.html](http://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).

*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.<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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 shudian, 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.

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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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

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 Legalists<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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

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

<sup>8</sup> 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.'"<sup>9</sup> 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

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

Chinese path, it will only be a bizarre combination of universal capitalist utilitarian rationality and the East Asian authoritarian tradition. Will this be a new Chinese civilization 2.0? Or rather another short-lived Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), possessing only the material power to conquer, yet lacking the spirit necessary to create a new civilization? In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongol cavalry not only conquered the heart of China, but also swept across Central Asia and Eastern Europe, becoming a great continental Eurasian empire. But those Mongols conquerors knew only “shooting eagles, bow outstretched”<sup>10</sup> and possessed only military power. They lacked civilization, and their empire, without spiritual attraction or advanced governing institutions, could not last long, and in less than a century the once mighty Mongol empire fell apart and perished. In his *History of Philosophy*, Hegel (1770–1831) said: “The position that a people will occupy in terms of the developmental stages of world history is not determined by that people’s external achievements, but rather by the spirit they embody. We must look at the stage of world spirit a people displays.”<sup>11</sup> By world spirit, he meant mainstream modern civilization. China should not pursue a unique model in resistance to world spirit, but instead the universal path that adheres closely to mainstream civilization, which it can develop and project, pushing it to new spiritual peaks.

So should we do as the proponents of universal values suggest, and set our sights on the West and transform China into a completely Europeanized country? On this question, Turkey is the opposite of Germany, as Turkey used civilization to replace culture. Turkey’s former incarnation was as the Ottoman Empire, but early in the twentieth century there occurred the Turkish Revolution, led by Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), whose objective was complete Europeanization. Not only did he separate church and state, he also carried out a thoroughgoing secularization in which the formerly mainstream Islam was excluded from all public spaces, henceforth existing only in the form of individual belief. Turkey followed this path in which civilization replaced culture for roughly one hundred years. Although Turkey did achieve modernization, it was unable to restore the former greatness of the Ottoman Empire. The American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1927–2008) argues that Turkey became a divided, uncertain state, with a system whose top half possessed a modern civilization like that of Europe, while the lower half

<sup>10</sup> Translator’s note: The reference is to the poem “Snow,” by Mao Zedong.

<sup>11</sup> Pan Gaofeng, ed. and trans., *Hege lishi zhixue* (Hegel’s historical philosophy) (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe, 2011), p. 58.

remained a world dominated by Islam.<sup>12</sup> This also means that civilization could not overcome culture and instead resulted in national disunity.

In the twenty-first century, Turkey initiated efforts to leave this modern dilemma behind. The ruling moderate Islamic party (AKP) sought internally to integrate universal modern civilization with the special characteristics of Turkish culture and Islamic civilization. While continuing to maintain the modern tradition of separation of church and state, Islam nonetheless was to return to the center of society, serving not only as a “religion of the heart” that can save the individual soul but also as a “religion of order” defining the ethics of the whole society. In this context, the late Ottoman thinker Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) has resurfaced. The subject of Gökalp’s reflections was how, in this time of great historical transformation, Turkey could simultaneously accept Western civilization and maintain its own cultural identity. From his perspective, with the arrival of modern civilization the original Islamic civilization took a step backward, becoming Turkey’s particular national culture. Universal civilization could not replace or supplant a particular national culture, because this was the source of a people’s self-identification and the way in which a people maintained its specificity.<sup>13</sup> What today’s Turkey is putting into practice is precisely Gökalp’s past prescriptions, in which the country as a whole displays a new attitude in which it belongs to mainstream civilization while at the same time revitalizing its own cultural traditions.

The conclusion we can draw from German and Turkish histories is that neither using culture to resist civilization, nor using civilization to replace culture, is the proper road for national revival. China should take a middle path between the two extremes, neither resisting world mainstream civilization, nor pursuing it – instead China should develop modern civilization, following world trends and at the same time employing her own cultural traditions to make her own contributions to the development of universal civilization. But to get to this point, China must first rejoin the peoples of the world, and having achieved wealth and power, return to the pursuit of civilization. Once China has adopted universal values and institutions it can set sail to navigate its way out of the narrow gorges of history.

<sup>12</sup> See Saimouer Hengtingdun (Samuel Huntington), *Wenming de chongtu yu shijie zixu de chongjian* (The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order), Zhou Qi, trans. (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe 1998), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> See Zan Tao, “Gekaerpu de Tuerqi zhuyi lilun” (Gokalp’s theory of Turkism), ch. 4 in Zan Tao, *Xiandai guojia yu minzu jiangou: 20 shiji qianqi Tuerqi minzu zhuyi yanjiu* (The construction of modern states and peoples: Studies in early twentieth-century Turkish nationalism) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2011), pp. 166–94.

### **Unifying the Three Traditions, Civil Religion, and Constitutional Patriotism**

Civilizations aren't sketched on a blank sheet of paper, where you can draw whatever pleases you. Building civilization requires respecting China's cultural traditions, because even if some of these are by now brilliant ruins, some are still resources that can be mined, and some are ancient legends waiting to be brought back to life. Contemporary China possesses three important cultural traditions: China's historical cultural traditions, with Confucianism at the center; a tradition of modern civilization represented by the Enlightenment movement from the May Fourth period forward; and a nearly century-long socialist tradition. In the early twentieth century, Confucianism lost its institutional and social base and fell apart, existing only in a fragmented way in the daily lives of the Chinese people. Modern civilization imported from the West has, over the past hundred years, experienced many twists and turns, and as of today has completed half of its mission – the rational capitalist order – while the rule of law and accountable government have yet to be achieved. As for the equally long socialist tradition, it too followed a tortuous path during the Mao Zedong period. Still, in its opposition to capitalist hegemony and its pursuit of the ideal of equality it retains its place in China's general psychology as well as its capacity for social mobilization. Liberals, socialists (both the old guard and the New Left), and Confucian conservatives hold conflicting attitudes and standpoints concerning these three existing cultural traditions, but whether they like them or hate them, the traditions are there, and there is no choice but to confront them and take them seriously.

The New Left scholar Gan Yang (b. 1952) was the first to discuss unifying the three traditions, the idea of bringing the Enlightenment tradition, the Confucian tradition, and the socialist tradition together as the basis for China's new civilization. Unifying the three traditions is not only desirable, it is also possible. From a historical standpoint, Chinese civilization was unlike Western monotheistic civilization and accepted many gods. Monotheism pursues unity; polytheism searches for harmony, and Chinese civilization existed for more than 2,000 years as a pluralistic state. On the spiritual dimension, Confucianism and Buddhism coexisted without difficulty as the religion for the elite, while the masses' beliefs were a combination of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism; Confucius, Laozi, and Buddha were all worshipped. The political order was a mix of hegemonic and benevolent rule. Confucianism provided legitimacy for the universal monarchy, while activist Legalism and non-action Huang Lao Daoism, a strain of Han dynasty Daoism with an

overtly political dimension, alternated in providing the technical nuts and bolts of ruling. But while Confucianism maintained a dominant, mainstream position in both the religious and political orders, unlike monotheistic Judaism, Christianity or Islam, Confucianism did not exclude other gods, but rather secularized foreign religions and popular beliefs, adding Confucian ethical values to the teachings of these other religions. The situation was similar in the political realm. Francis Fukuyama has argued that China was the first to develop into a strong country with a unified, centralized monarchy, a bureaucratic control system, and an examination system for elite recruitment. This rationalized state capacity was developed in common by Confucians and Legalists. Li Ling (b. 1948), a well-known scholar of Chinese intellectual history, has noted that “Europe only had religious unity, not national unity. China is exactly the opposite, and its particularity is that it insists on national unity and religious plurality.”<sup>14</sup> In historical Europe, we note one religion and many countries, while in historical China we find one nation and many religions. This means that unifying the three traditions is the common state of a Chinese civilization where the many reside in the one.

But we cannot simply stop at the level of a slogan like “unify the three traditions,” because whether we’re talking about ancient Chinese civilization or modern civilization or the socialist tradition, their contents are extremely complex, multi-faceted, and there exist all sorts of contradictions and conflicts. Within Chinese civilization we find five traditions – Confucian, Daoist, Mohist, Buddhist, and Legalist – and even within Confucianism there is the cultivation wing with its emphasis on morality and the practical wing with its emphasis on statecraft, there is the humanistic trend that takes people as the base and the authoritarian tradition that sees the emperor as the key link. Within Western civilization, even remaining within the Atlantic world, there are important differences between the American model and the European model. As a new continental power, the United States lacked the aristocratic traditions of the Middle Ages as well as Europe’s modern social movements, which shaped its heroic tradition of worshipping individual struggle. Americans harbor great mistrust of the government, and individual liberties and rights are sacred, untouchable natural rights. America is also a country of the Puritan ethic, full of religious feeling, and independent individuals are also possessed of a group spirit, which has led

<sup>14</sup> Li Ling, “Huanqiu tongci liangre: Wode Zhongguo guan he Meiguo guan” (The same warmth and cold throughout the world: My views of China and America), originally given as a talk on October 12, 2011, at the Jiusan xueshe, one of China’s small, legal democratic parties. It is available online at [www.douban.com/group/topic/35402627/](http://www.douban.com/group/topic/35402627/).



them to construct a thriving civil society. In comparison, European secularism is more thorough and religious sentiment weaker, and democratic socialism, the product of important modern social movements evolving out of liberalism's internal changes, has become the European mainstream. Unlike Americans, Europeans do not believe that capitalism is a given, and are more willing to use state intervention to bring about social equality and justice. As Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) and Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) have said: "In European society, secularism is quite mature. Europeans believe in state organization and management, and are suspicious of the capacities of the market. They have an acute 'dialectical Enlightenment' consciousness, and do not place naïve optimistic faith in the development of science and technology."<sup>15</sup> As for the socialism that developed from Marx's work, as everyone knows, there are different traditions in the West and in the East. The Western European socialist party traditions created by Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), the German political theorist and politician, and Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), the Czech-Austrian intellectual and politician, which advocate socialist ideals in the context of the constitutional framework of modern civilization, have today become the European mainstream. Eastern socialist practice from Russia to China, over the course of the last century and more, has made great achievements but has also declined, and at present has an uneasy, contradictory relationship with modern civilization.

Because of the complexity and multiplicity within traditional civilization, modern civilization, and socialist civilization, the question is not whether to unify the three traditions, but rather which "three traditions" we might seek to unify? It's like a bartender's competition producing different modern cocktails from different recipes where the tastes differ greatly, one from the other. If we choose "rich country and strong army" from the Legalists, together with the strength and power of capitalism from modern Western civilization and the nationalist despotic tradition of Eastern socialism, then when we unify the three traditions, the monster we create will be a nationalist authoritarian aristocratic capitalism or perhaps a bureaucratic Legalist socialism. And if we select Confucian paternalistic and humanistic traditions, liberalism's emphasis on freedom, the rule of law, and democracy, as well as the ideals of socialist equality, when we blend them together this unity of the three traditions will bring

<sup>15</sup> Habeimasi (Jürgen Habermas) and Delida (Jacques Derrida), "Eryue shiwuri, Ouzhou renmen de tuanjeri: Yi hexin Ouzhou wei qidian, dijie gongtong waijiao zhengce" (February 15, or, What binds Europeans together: Plea for a common foreign policy, beginning in core Europe), in Dannier Liwei (Daniel Levy) et al., eds., *Jiu Ouzhou, xin Ouzhou, hexin Ouzhou* (Old Europe, new Europe, core Europe), Liu Bohuan, trans. (Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi chubanshe, 2010), p. 30.

together the wisdom and essence of all civilizations past and present, Chinese and foreign, and the path will be paved for a new blossoming.

From a certain perspective, China's rise is also the result of some version of unifying the three traditions, but in a way that we cannot continue, a way that is unhealthy. When we shift from "wealth and power" to "civilization" we need to change the recipe for "unifying the three traditions," shifting from the Legalist pursuit of a rich country and strong army to the Confucian posture of taking care of the people, taking modern rationalism a step forward to achieve the civilizational rule of law and democracy, and from the Eastern socialist authoritarian tradition shift to the respect for freedom and equality that we find in the original Marxist classics. Even if we are still borrowing from the Western experience, our gaze should shift from learning from the United States to learning from Europe. Whether we're talking about national histories or cultural traditions, the differences between the two great countries that are China and the United States are too important. As Henry Kissinger (b. 1923) said, Americans and Chinese both view their civilization and philosophy as belonging to different exceptionalisms: "China and America both believe they represent unique sets of values."<sup>16</sup> By comparison, China and the European continent are closer; for example, China and Europe are both homes of ancient axial civilizations, and these civilizations contain complexity and multiplicity. Like France, China has a great tradition as a bureaucratic country, and like Germany at one point fell behind and faced the necessity to catch up with the advanced countries, producing tensions and conflicts between civilization and culture. China, like Europe, has been much influenced by Marxism, and has a deep socialist tradition, its religious coloration is rather weak, and its level of secularization quite thorough. The development of a country's civilization cannot simply erase existing traditions and start over from scratch.

Civilization is both a political-legal system and a common culture. The American legal scholar Harold Berman (1918–2007) said: "Law must be believed, otherwise it serves no purpose."<sup>17</sup> The soul of law and systems is that all citizens believe in and identify with the values expressed therein. This set of values can be divided into the two dimensions of political values and religious values, expressed separately as constitutional patriotism and civil religion. Constitutional patriotism is a fairly thin kind

<sup>16</sup> Ji Xinge (Henry Kissinger), *Lun Zhongguo* (On China), Hu Liping et al., trans. (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2012), preface, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Bo Erman (Harold Berman) *Falü yu zongjiao* (The interaction of law and religion), Liang Zhiping, trans. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1991), p. 28.

of national identity, an identity with the political values represented by the constitution and with common political culture. Civil religion is much thicker, and includes the people's common history, culture, and traditions as well as moral and ethical values and the understanding of the transcendent sources of these values.

Constitutional patriotism emerged after World War II as a means to bring together the German people after the ghost of Nazism had been exorcised. And after the unification of the two Germanys, it became the commonly shared standpoint of the peoples of East and West Germany who had different religions and ideological backgrounds. This clearly has significance as a reference point and a model as we attempt to resolve the nationalities question in China. While Han Chinese make up more than 90 percent of the large family of the Chinese people, there are still fifty-five minority groups, such as Tibetans, Muslims, Mongols, and other peripheral frontier groups that have, like the Han, long histories and well-developed religions: Tibetan Buddhism and Islam, for example. And since the 1990s, Protestant and Catholic believers have increased. In contemporary China, world mainstream civilizations have already been internalized, and religions associated with these civilizations have become Chinese religions. The five big religions of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all coexist, and have become an unchangeable plural fact. As Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), China's pioneering sociologist, once pointed out, the Chinese people are in fact many peoples in one body. Not only are there many nationalities, there are also many beliefs – how could we combine all of this into a single unified modern country? The “five peoples’ republic”<sup>18</sup> of the early Republican period was a legal-political solution, but did not really resolve the underlying problem of the common culture needed to unify the country. Almost a century later, the Han are still trying to assimilate the minority peoples into their own mainstream culture, for example taking Han belief in Confucian culture as the basis for a public religion or even a national religion. With the help of secularized modern power, Confucian culture really has assimilated many cultural groups who possessed only popular culture and beliefs, but it cannot assimilate Tibetans and Muslims whose religion is on the same level as that of the Han. Instead, efforts at forced assimilation incite a sort of cultural backlash. This means that no religion (including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam) can serve as the national religion

<sup>18</sup> Translator's note: The notion, put forth by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and the Nationalist Party, that the Chinese Republic was made up of five dominant ethnic groups: the Han, the Tibetans, the Mongols, the Manchus, and the Moslems (Hui).

supporting a legal-political system, nor can it become the common belief of the Chinese people. Culture, ethics, and religion must give groups with different beliefs sufficient space to govern themselves, while the political community relies on existing basic political values – freedom, equality, rule of law, constitutional rule, division of church and state, accountability of government, etc. This has nothing to do with whether the religion and ethics in question are “good,” but rather establishes the norm for what is “right” in the political territory of a common political culture that transcends the five big religions and at the same time publicly recognizes different religions, philosophies and ethical views, and provides institutional identity and legal guarantees in the clear establishment of a country’s constitution. The five religions are plural, while constitutional patriotism constructs one body; this formula of pluralism in unity will allow us to rebuild the national identity of the Chinese people.

Yet constitutional patriotism remains weak in the final analysis. It is solely a political identity with no relationship to cultural identity. Its function is confined to the political sphere, and not only does it not address private religious beliefs, it also has nothing to do with society’s common spaces that are not political or individual. But the public life of citizens, in addition to the political realm, contains two important spaces: the social and the cultural. This is what Habermas called the “life-world” that exists outside of the “systems world.” In the public worlds of society and culture there needs to be a civil religion with stronger values, not just political values, but extending to ethical values and moral values that have evolved from historical and cultural experience, and even religious experience. At this point we should identify two different kinds of religion: “religion of the heart” and “religion of social order.” The religion of the heart saves the individual soul, it provides the soul of believers with a sense of belonging and the meaning of life. A religion of social order only provides basic moral and ethical rules for public life, even if behind these we find a transcendent source for the values.<sup>19</sup> When we are talking about civil religion, we are not talking about the religion of the heart that deals with the individual soul, but with the religion of order that sustains the social public order. In thoroughly secularized Europe, notions of civil religion are fairly weak, but in the United States, with its rich religious tradition, there has always existed what American sociologist Robert Bellah (1927–2013) has called “civil religion.” The American values such as freedom and equality affirmed in the Declaration of Independence all have their transcendent sources in the will of the creator. But this

<sup>19</sup> See Ha Qiesen (Richard G. Hucheson), *Baigongzhong de shangdi* (God in the White House), Duan Qi et al., trans. (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1992), p. 40.

idea of God is abstract, and doesn't necessarily mean the Christian God; it can be understood as the transcendent god of another religion. The true point of civil religion is not love of country but rather belief in the values respected by that county. It is not worship of a specific deity, but rather support for the values symbolized by the community in question. Even if in his private space each individual can have his own religious beliefs, in the common space of the community of that people and that nation, there is a civil religion – common political values and ethical values that embody a country's core values. Civil religion has to do with transformation through education and not with religion as such. It is not the national religion, even if it is one with the country and the people. It is separate from the political order, even if it is recognized and affirmed by the country. Civil religion is the historical experience shared by the people of a country, it is the commonly appreciated national culture and the measure of common values, even if it might come from different gods, moralities, and philosophies.

In that case, what form will China's future civil religion take? Traditional Confucianism, or a new public culture combining Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity with liberalism, socialism, and other modern ideologies? Clearly this is a question worth taking seriously. Whether the Chinese people become a unified people, whether China's national construction can succeed, depends on whether China can emerge from its current vacuum of core values, and conceive a civil religion that the entire country can affirm. This civil religion must both follow mainstream civilization, containing the universal values of all humanity, and at the same time must contain elements from China's own historical culture. One might say that the day that China's civil religion is born is the day that Chinese civilization will be re-established. Compared with institutional construction, this clearly is a much more difficult civilizational transition.

“For the road was so far and so distant was my journey” ... Yet civilizational construction requires only patience and a clear sense of direction, so that we no longer follow the tortured path.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Translator's note: The quotation is from Qu Yuan's "Lisao" (On encountering trouble), a famous poem from ancient China's Warring States period. The translation is from David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and other Poets* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 30. The poem recounts the travails of a righteous Nobleman, wrongly banished by the king, as he searches for redemption and eventually chooses suicide. The poem has overtones of intellectual dissent, or independence, as the author of the autobiographical poem remains true to himself, even in death. Here, Xu Jilin seems to be saying "We've got our work cut out for us, so let's get to it."