

## The concept of civilization and the civilization of China<sup>1</sup>

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My good friend and co-researcher Wang Mingming has presented to you his conception of the three rings of anthropological studies in China: the inner ring is that of local studies in the core, or of the majority ethnicity, what Fei Xiaotong called the soil of rural China; the second is that of studies of non-Han peoples in China; and the third is studies by Chinese outside China. This is an idea of three rings from the point of view of China's civilizational centre. A far older Chinese version is that of an inner core (ring 1), the periphery of partially assimilated or 'cooked' barbarians (ring 2) and the outer states of 'raw' barbarians (ring 3) (see for instance the account of this as a Confucian civilizing mission in Stevan Harrell 1995).

There are also another three rings, within the traditions of anthropology as it emerged in Europe, which Wang Mingming has named the 'Western' three rings. They too are a modern version of an older division of the world into three. The older version is in the universal histories of eighteenth-century philosophers and political economists, who divided history into three broad stages: savage, barbarian and civilized. The later version of these three became a division into primitive societies, ancient civilizations and modern civilization. (For excellent histories of this early history of anthropology, see Stocking 1982 and 1987). Wang Mingming pointed out that, while in France the anthropological study of both primitive societies and ancient civilizations was maintained, in English-language anthropology, the study of ancient civilizations has been largely neglected. I would add two further things. One is that since the 1950s anthropologists everywhere have turned from the study of primitive societies and cultures to local, intensive studies everywhere, including their own, so-called 'modern' societies. The second and most important point for this lecture is that, just as the word 'culture' is now applied to every society, including those formerly classified as primitive, so it is possible

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to apply to all societies the word ‘civilization’, with all its implications of a long history.

Wang Mingming has written extensively about the mediating ring 2. I too am fascinated by it. I think this mediating ring in fact sets up two centres, a distant one and the local one, which knows itself to be remote from the distant centre, economically, culturally and politically. The innermost circle is of the local as its own centre but also refers to a region and to hierarchies of economic, political and civilizational power within China. An example is the kingdom of Nanchao in the southwestern periphery, which was its own civilizational and trading centre but also mediated the civilizational and tributary centres of China, Tibet and India.

Should we include non-Chinese anthropologists of China like me in these three rings? In principle, it could be a Chinese or a non-Chinese in any one of the three. One major difference is that until the 1980s English-language anthropologists did not work with historians so that they could adequately deal with the scope and temporal dimensions of Chinese civilization, instead conducting local studies of Chinese or ethnic minorities in China. By contrast, Chinese anthropologists have always attempted to generalize to the whole of China and to a long Chinese history – sometimes based simply on one local village study, and rightly criticized by Edmund Leach for doing so. I want to make another point about anthropology.

It is of utmost importance to understand that anthropology, above all other social sciences, is bound by the task of expounding and including in its analyses and interpretations the viewpoint of the people studied. It is the task of an anthropologist to modify anthropology’s own theories and assumptions by opening them out and testing them against the local understanding of itself. This is what I take Professor Fei Xiaotong to have meant when he said of his first fieldwork, in the second ring, that the most valuable insights he gathered were from the shocks of what he had not expected.

Professor Fei and many of his Chinese contemporaries were, as so many Chinese anthropologists are now, well informed and selectively influenced by non-Chinese anthropologists, either through their reading or because they had non-Chinese teachers. Similarly, all non-Chinese anthropologists of China know at least the translated works of Chinese anthropologists. And all non-Han, so-called minority-people anthropologists are well informed by both, even when they conduct research on their own people and localities. So it is possible for all of us to inhabit all of the circles. Every anthropologist, even a so-called native anthropologist, should, as an anthropologist, treat the subjects of her or his research as if from the outside, taking nothing for granted, bringing as much as possible into the open, including common sense, as if it were strange, but always respecting it as a way of understanding and living.

But after all that has been said, it is also true to say that coming as an outsider to a locality is not the same if you are close – in language, life experience and continuous residence – as if you are distant – having to learn the language, residing somewhere quite else and not having lived anywhere near there before. Similarly, if your reading is mainly in the other, distant languages, then you are bound to

translate back into those languages and theories, sensitively and critically, whereas the task of translation into a non-Chinese language may be desired but is less easy and immediate for Chinese anthropologists of China.

I am, then, from the outer circle and I write in English. But through close cooperation and exchanges with Chinese anthropologists, principally with Wang Mingming and through him others, I have been affected and influenced by my Chinese colleagues. In one way in particular, that influence has brought me to the topic of my talk today: civilization. Exposure to Chinese ways of understanding China has moved anthropologists of China like me towards history, but I have in addition been, for several years now, through engaged discussions with Wang Mingming and his colleagues, inclined to take a very long-term and large-scale view of the historical anthropology of China. At the same time, as an anthropologist, I have been working with an English friend and colleague, Michael Rowlands, to review the old ethnological and anthropological concept of civilization in order to carry out a project promoting the comparison of civilizations. As an anthropologist and as an outsider, I shall do this without endorsing what Chinese say is civilization, which may have truth for China but not necessarily elsewhere, nor what Europeans said was civilization in praise of themselves.

Obviously the very term ‘civilization’ – *wenming* – and the other term to which I will relate it closely, ‘empire’ – *diguo* – are both new in Chinese, less than 150 years old. So, even as used now in China, these are outsider terms in origin. In fact, the word ‘civilization’, a verb-noun, is relatively new in European languages. There is no Latin equivalent, just the Latin for ‘civil’, not a verb-noun. On the other hand, ‘empire’ or the Latin *imperium* is very old.

Before standing back and introducing what I mean by a revived concept of civilization, I want to make two points concerning local studies in the inner and mediating rings from the point of view of this revived concept of civilization.

1. What is the centre and what is the periphery is not fixed; similarly what is Chinese and what is non-Chinese, in terms of Chinese civilization, is not fixed either. It has been well argued, by James Scott and others, that what are now classified as non-Han ethnic groups or nationalities have become differentiated by a combination of their own volition and Chinese imperial dominion, when viewed in a long-term historical perspective. Conversely, regions of what is now China have in the past been their own centres of civilization, combining influences from a number of other civilizations, including Chinese but also those of, for instance, the Inner Asian pastoralist aristocracies from the Xiongnu onwards (David Sneath, *The Headless State*, 2007).

2. Regions of what is considered to be China Proper should be considered in the long term as centres that contributed to what became Chinese civilization from the Bronze Age onwards. Further, claims to what is Chinese civilization can be and are made from many centres, not just from whatever is the current political centre of authority. Each such claim is equally valid, even though it may not have the

authorization and acknowledgment of the political centre and even though it may not agree with or be consistent with other similar claims.

The concept of civilization has to be able to accommodate such changes and such variation and rivalry. It must also be broad enough to include the fact that any one civilization can be a disputed civilization with many centres. It should not assume a fixed map of rings.

‘Civilization’ is dividable, as in China, into ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ civilization. But it is best seen as both at the same time. In the People’s Republic of China, spiritual civilization is an official description of desirable conduct, ranging from hygiene to having good educational qualifications to maintaining harmonious relations with others. It is something characterized as both ‘Chinese’ and ‘socialist’. Obviously, these characterizations are highly ideological, but like all ideology they are hegemonic, which is to say different people may claim to be civilized in ways that do not conform to standards composed by state ideologues, and people can perform being civilized according to those standards while conducting themselves in ways that do not conform, even while staking a claim to the same civilization; for instance, a Muslim idea of cleanliness is declared by Hui Chinese to be superior to what is stated by the government and to be no less a part of the civilization of the Chinese people (Gillette 2000: 235).

‘Civilization’ is a claim made by every nation and state for its historical contribution to the world. However small, every state and its peoples stake a claim to be a special place and to have a special history with claims upon the ‘modern’ world. The teleologies – the progressive histories – of all peoples are never just of an ‘us’ among others. They also universalize their claims to civilization. In these tendentious conceptualizations of ‘civilization’, the term is always also ideological, a justification for a way of life with claims upon the world as well as upon the government of a people. Civilization, as a verb-noun invented in eighteenth-century France, Scotland and England, has been relativized against its notoriously ethnocentric and imperial organization of knowledge and privilege. But it still performs these ideological tasks locally and in global cultural relations.

‘Civilization’ as a usage is always ideological, which is to say it is hegemonic and contentious. But that does not mean we, as anthropologists, should not use this word and develop *a concept of its usage*. It is precisely its ideological usage that is a major matter of interest, though not the only one. Such a concept would of course have to go further than contentious usage. Civilization is also a description of habitual and transmitted aspirations for self-realization during a life course or over several generations of self-cultivation and hierarchical mobility, aspirations shared if also disputed with others professing to share the same or similarly formulated and identified standards of aspiration. Such a concept would be descriptive and not ideological, even though it is certainly *about* ideology, in that it would not endorse or validate the standards it describes in each case.

So far, then, I can sum up what a concept of ‘civilization’ describes: hierarchy, ideology and aspiration, which are at once continuous historically and at the

same time transformed standards and hierarchies of aspiration; civilizations have histories. The concept of civilization can be used critically, exposing the ideological usage that justifies continuation of privilege and denies the civilizational aspirations of others.

### **The concept of civilization in anthropology: Lévi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss**

Famously, among anthropologists and beyond, Lévi-Strauss showed that the myths told in one of the cultures or sub-cultures of the Northwest American Amerindians were structural transformations of the myths of others and that the extension of mythemes (elements of the stories and clusters of their themes) and design motifs in the layout of villages and dwellings, in the painting of pottery and more, reached much further, back across the Bering Strait into far eastern Central Asia and in the opposite direction on into Central America and the Amazon. This historical spread is what his main forbear in French anthropology, Marcel Mauss, had called ‘civilization’.

In a little-known article Mauss wrote on civilization – recently translated and published in English (2006) – Mauss defined civilization as consisting of ‘those social phenomena which are common to several societies’, but he then insists that they are socially linked by adding that they must be ‘more or less related to each other’ by lasting contact ‘through some permanent intermediaries, or through relationships from common descent’ (p. 61), such that on the next page he further refines the concept and calls a civilization ‘a family of societies’ (p. 62). We can imagine what these permanent intermediaries are when we think of tributary or diplomatic or trading or marital relations. In the technical terms of his and Emile Durkheim’s sociology, a civilization is the spread of collective representations and practices, which are the social aspect of the materials of civilization. He says they are ‘arbitrary’, by which he means they are not universal but preferred modes of making and doing things. In the actual order of analysis, to say these things belong together as a civilization is to infer from archaeological and historical evidence a common set of practices and meanings, not one dominant characteristic, design or thing, but the way they all hang together and evolve over time and space.

Possibly the most interesting characteristic of the concept is one that Mauss would consider to be a weakness. It is the *loose* integration of its elements, not a systemic integration. Even though it can be said of a civilization that it is reproduced, just as social relations or systems of meaning and material practices are reproduced, we need not feel compelled to put all these together into a single totality and its reproduction. Civilization is like ‘culture’, but it emphasizes the *spread* of culture. It is like ‘society’, but it is partial, forcing us to think and to infer how elements of a culture carry with them habits of relating to others, practices and ways of making things, but transformed with different additions from elsewhere, from other civilizations. ‘Civilization’ is a grand, but not a totalizing concept of social, cultural and material life. It forces us to analyse *mixtures*, the spreads of culture into each other and in combination with each other.

### Historical human types: Dumont and hierarchy

Mike Rowlands and I want to expand this conception of Marcel Mauss. We are attracted to the challenge with which civilization faces us: accounting for long duration persistence while also saying and analysing its having undergone major and irreversible transformations. Persistence and slow but radical transformation have been argued by at least two historical materialisms, Marxist and Braudelian. The merit of Fernand Braudel's is that it includes ritual and the habits of everyday life as basic material, whereas Marx treats them as ideology. There are valid objections to Braudel's dismissing political and military turbulence as superficial (his version of superstructure) as if there cannot be demographic and ecological turbulence and fast change. And we should, with Marx, enquire into the mutual effects of political and ecological or economic events.

In any case, ideology has a very comprehensive scope when used by another thinker, the French anthropologist Louis Dumont, whose seminal idea of hierarchy has been very influential and is therefore a vital stepping stone towards a new concept of civilization. Dumont described a pair of hierarchies that he called ideologies: those of *homo aequalis* or *homo minor* and *homo hierarchicus* or *homo major*. One is a hierarchy of endogamous status groups – castes – constituted by rules of propriety and a division of labour, a hierarchy from the lowest to the highest, the most polluted to the purest, in which aspiration to rise in the hierarchy can be realized by caste or sub-caste mobility, through domination converted into caste or by acquiring higher caste accomplishment and changing or disguising one's natal status. The other is a hierarchy of equality of opportunity in which there is individual and family mobility up and down, according to ideals of merit in learning and its accomplishment, of risk-taking and its just rewards and of work and its just fruits.

These are ideals, dominant ideals, and the reality of class relations is not a realization of these ideals in either India for *homo hierarchicus* or Europe or the USA for *homo aequalis*. So, one problem shadowing Dumont's account of these two ideologies is whether or rather how these ideologies are affected by or in turn affect the processes of political economy. Critically, it must be asked whether their *non*-realization produces other ideologies, variants upon them or altogether different and opposed ones in the very same population among whom it can be said these hierarchies are persistent and dominant: such as revolutionary ideologies. Dumont offers no way of saying how hierarchy might be subject to transformation and itself have been the result of structural transformation.

In addition to these serious limitations, there is also a more vexing comparative problem. Dumont has set up binary opposites: *aequalis*: *hierarchicus*, in which *aequalis* stands for modernity, now globally spread, and *hierarchicus* presents general characteristics, as well as Indian peculiarities, of pre-modern hierarchy. When we use the word 'civilization', instead of 'ideology', to describe such hierarchies, we will replace this binary with the possibility of defining several such *long-persisting but historical human types*, of which equal-opportunity-*aequalis*

and the Indian-purity-and-pollution are just two. Indeed, Dumont himself refers to different civilizations, each having their own temporality (p. 242). Instead of proposing that one of them, the Brahmanic, is a pure type, as Dumont does, wouldn't it be better to describe all civilization as hierarchical and to specify each instance as a historical human type?

In historical research, the characteristic of all hierarchy that I would want to preserve is that all civilizations are forms of aspiration, or inducements of aspiration in material practices, of hospitality, eating, as well as ritual and rhetoric – aspiration such as the acquiring of skills in the arts of persuasion and disguise, or discretion. Let me explain. We are including all human cultures in the broader and more linked-up concept of civilization, as structures that are hierarchical, be the hierarchy as shallow as age-grading or as steep as the Brahmanic and the class statuses of equal opportunity. The property of every civilization, we suggest, is a transmission of time-frames and practices of and for moving up a hierarchy. Seen from within these practices, every civilization conveys senses of superiority, several of them and not necessarily unified, but bearing a family resemblance to one another. In describing them, a comparative anthropology of civilizations does not of course endorse any of them as a universal standard, even though they may in their own terms claim to be universal. The important point is that a civilization is a transmission of aspiration over a time-frame that may include generations or longer periodicities, or simply a life course. Most important is that these practices are embedded in everyday material practices.

### **Including the low with the high, everyday material practices with textual traditions**

In an earlier attempt at a comparative historical anthropology of cultures and civilizations in the 1950s and 1960s, organized and heavily influenced by Robert Redfield and his concept of Great Traditions, every civilization was seen from its centres downwards. In the case of the two China volumes in the series (Wright 1953 and Fairbank 1957), this was from textual traditions, capital cities and ritual orthodoxies because they unified and brought together the everyday material practices and thoughts of ordinary people and their little traditions. We reject this model in favour of including everyday practices, and doing so without endorsing or prioritizing textual traditions, high status practices or capital cities and tops of hierarchies in general, in order to see the work of transmission at all levels and how, or if, they work together. Indeed, the fact that the main centres accommodate themselves to less powerful centres, within their regimes as well as on the frontiers of their regimes, shows the reverse of so-called Little and Great Traditions in terms of agency.

One reason why I like the concept of civilization is that it raises the question of transformation through time. Another reason why I like it is that, once put into the plural, instead of establishing a universal standard for humanity, as it did in its first French and English usages, it describes the same sort of thing as does

‘culture’, but as a spread, not a unit. And that is where I want to start an approach to China.

### **Culture as civilization: Marshall Sahlins and James Scott**

Sahlins’s take on spread, like Lévi-Strauss’s, is that it is structured. But in his case, spread is structured by the making of distinctions between contiguous peoples or places that are in warring or raiding relations, in which each defines itself against the other and thus is dependent on the immediately outside other for its self-definition, and this of course goes from one set of neighbouring peoples to the next. Each is a centre of representation and hierarchy defined against other centres of representation and of hierarchy. But since relations of marriage and treaty with gifts link each to the other, and by conquest the outside can become the centre of the inside of the other, the differentiations are internal as well as external. Over long periods of time and contiguity, these differentiations become faultlines for intensification and escalation of local conflicts into civil wars within each and of wars between the two neighbours. There is no whole, just parts defined by structural opposition in regions that can in principle be extended ever outwards by their contrasts and their relations to external conditions, in which mythic figures of potential domination that are out of human or internal control prefigure and postfigure actual external political powers. Each centred culture is defined by that upon which its carriers and creators depend, an outer alterity and the compulsion to incorporate what is outside. In this structural fashion, with the aid of the pervasive figure of the stranger ruler and of internalized strangers that are created by marriage, various kinds of spread ranging from empire, through empires of hegemony but not direct rule, or what Tambiah (1985) called galactic systems radiating from civilizational centres and of trade, to relations of raiding and war, Sahlins can show each identification of a polity, small and large, to be what he calls a ‘cosmocracy’, defined against mytho–historic representations of its actual others. These mythic representations are enacted in rituals of command of life and the sources of fertility, of the giving of life by an outsider who is also outside the control of ordinary practices and can on occasion deal death and disease instead of life.

In this manner, in a recent unpublished lecture (2008), Sahlins reaches China, approaching China as a galactic centre from maritime Southeast Asia via the Kachin in mainland Southeast Asia and the mediating kingdom of Nanchao on the direct tributary fringe of the Chinese empire. He relies heavily on the image of the stranger king and to some extent on Dumont’s concept of hierarchy, which I would wish to revise, as I have already said. But the basic ideas of alterity and of mediation with the beyond or outside and that this mediation is itself hierarchical are vital. The second ring, in Wang Mingming’s terms, mediates third and indeed further rings to the galactic, or imperial, centre. In the other direction, the galactic centre defines itself against them, while the outer rings define themselves against one another and in the same way reach other galactic centres, including the Indian.



James Scott (2009) approaches China by the same route as Sahlins. But in his case he uses the idea of China as a civilization, and turns his back to its centre, describing its ever-receding peripheries as not only a definition against but also as an escape from the very centrality and hierarchy that is Chinese civilization.

In a gradual process, over many centuries, Scott says, people of the mountains, deserts and swamps have been formed as escapees from civilization, but also with their own claims to the civilization that they have escaped, as manifested in the stories of having had their writing stolen or having themselves lost the skill by a careless act. Such stories transmitted orally are an ironic comment on the fixity and control exerted through the techniques of literacy, in tax registers, cadastral surveys and censuses of empire. They are the eventual results of flight because of rebellion against over-high taxes and labour demands, or from famine and disease, or desertion from conscription or escape from slavery, or the seeking of refuge from correction of ritual practices. Scott calls this process of seeking refuge from civilization a 'self-barbarization'; in fact, it can be described as a history of anarchy, counter to the hierarchy of civilization. Ecologically, it is a move to swidden from sedentary agriculture.

I find this an intriguing argument but it is also one-sided, an argument from the side of the anarchic. It neglects what I would describe as the opposite in a pulse between margins and centre, namely the movement from the margins to the centre, from the anarchic to the hierarchic, not only the shallow hierarchies of, for instance, Highland Burma, but back to the steep hierarchy of kingdoms on the great fringes of the hierarchical centre – the tributary or independent kingdoms based on trade and their own agricultural sedentarization, or the oasis states of Central Asia incubating new civilizations out of the flows of travellers and traders from larger political civilizations. Indeed, as Edmund Leach (1977: 240–249) argued, the Nanchao and other Shan states that spread into what is now central Burma or Myanmar, were centres of a civilization that combined both Hindic and Sinic institutions. Nor does Scott deal with the pulses of centralizing monarchies and aristocratic galaxies of the pastoral economies and control of trade routes forming federations and empires in Inner Asian states of aristocratic houses and their vassals (Sneath 2007: 195–198) that made a counterpoint with Chinese empires from the first emperor of China onwards, related by wives, counter-gifts to tribute, trade (for instance for horses) and war.

### **China's centrality**

I now move to Chinese time-frames and practices of centrality, how a Chinese civilization is transmitted in its own practices, including non-verbal as well as verbal and textual practices.

Here I will try to sum up as an outsider what I understand to be key elements of Chinese civilization in terms taken from Chinese concepts of Chinese civilization.

Intellectuals of and within Chinese civilization had profound conceptions of persistence and change. They are of a pulse outwards and inwards and another alternation in which rule by illuminated emperors and ministers (*mingjun*) replace and are followed by confused rulers (*hunjun*), a pulse of harmonization and confusion.<sup>2</sup> Secular change and the physics and metaphysics of constant flux are accommodated in these two pulses. Illuminated rule is adjustment to secular change and response to the circuits of energy, bringing them into harmonic balance and productivity, within one's body or in responsive networks of social relations, and responsive to the features of the living and physical environment, Earth (*Di*), according to eternal principles of change cosmologically located in Heaven (*Tian*). On a world scale, this is the function of the emperor, who harmonizes and mediates between Heaven and Earth. But self-cultivation of the same kind as that conducted by an emperor and his chosen advisers can be learned by all from the emperor down. Self-cultivation is conducted in the most material and mundane disciplines of eating and agrarian cultivation, as well as through special exercises and meditation, and in particular through the proper conduct of lateral and hierarchical social relations, the etiquette and the rites of hospitality, of greeting and of separation.

Self-cultivation for cosmic balance is a return to a central cosmogonic state of primary and generative chaos (*hundun*), out of which emerge the myriad things in cycles of Yin and Yang. In the conduct of rites of the annual cycle or of the inauguration of a temple or a tomb, it is also a mediation from Earth to Heaven and between the living and the dead, involving journeys outwards and upwards to points where the two realms are close, visualized internally in the architecture of a house or a temple or a palace, or in the inner crucible of the body and the space just above the head, or externally as mountains. Actual sacred mountains and their temples are the destinations of pilgrimage, by the emperor out of sight of ordinary people, but also by ordinary worshippers. And these sacred mountains are away from the political capitals of the realm and the territorial centres of local cults. In other words, there is a movement from and a return to the centres, replenishing them, both with spiritual life and with armed might. The armed forces mustered for the overthrow of a dynasty and the establishing of a new dynasty always included generals and their men from the fringes of the empire as well as those from

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<sup>2</sup> Among others, in the following I am most indebted to conversations with Wang Mingming, and reading his forthcoming book on the long history of the city of Quanzhou. [Editor's note: *Empire and Local Worlds: A Chinese Model for Long-Term Historical Anthropology* by Wang Mingming was published by Left Coast Press in June 2009.] In the meantime, see Wang Mingming (2004: 35). *Hunjun* and *mingjun* were used in popular literature and drama to distinguish between *zhi* (well-ordered and prosperous) and *luan* (mismanaged and chaotic) reigns, the terms preferred by intellectual commentators on emperors who were either confused or were controlled by their wives' families who had strong military power. One of the intellectuals to comment in this way was Liang Qichao in his *Research Method of Chinese History*, which has a chapter called 'Several important problems in the study of cultural history', written in 1926 criticizing his own previous evolutionist, progressive view of human history. (Thanks to Wang Mingming for this information – personal communication.)

the main territory, called *hua-nei*, ‘within the bounds of civilized flourishing’. The periphery is then a source both of renewal and of invasion. This is a pulse of absorption and of centring, in which the outside is alternatively designated as the source of life and the source of disorder. The recreation of order is to restore demonic powers to their places on the margin and as subordinates to military command, as forces within its control. Restoration of life is to draw energies from the outer and upper regions to replenish the centre, be it a local centre or the imperial centre.

These are of course ideals, and Chinese cosmocracy, variously transmitted in the classics of rites (both those of Daoism and those associated with Confucius), includes depiction of the world as constantly out of balance, needing adjustment, in confusion and in danger of further confusion, needing correction.

The equivalent in China to the uncontrolled and powerful other who commands life and death may be what I have already described in the pulse outwards to distant centres. Or it is described by Chinese moral historians and in common usage as confusion (*hunluan*) and disorder (*luan*) – or obscurity (*an*) – the world of amorality, exploitation and excess that needs to be ordered from the centres. Or it is the ocean of opportunity and ruthless conduct from which retreat to central havens is desirable. On the other hand, there can be enlivening (*huoshi*) disorder, in which local leaders vie for face and influence in a contained fashion (Wang Mingming 2004; Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming 2001: chapter 7). In other words, the outside that can also be inside is a state of disruption, sudden change and dislocation that needs to be absorbed and ordered by adjustment of transmitted order, but not to the point of stagnation.

The proper conduct of relations – *lishangwanglai* – is among unequal statuses, principally those of patrilineal descent, patrilocal marriage and patriarchy, analogically extended to ruler and subject and to trusted associates like siblings and their networks. Until the state schooling of mass literacy in the second half of the twentieth century, to be cultivated (*hua*) involved accomplishment in the arts of high literacy, and that included the most regulated literacy of what needed to be read and reproduced to pass the examinations qualifying the candidate for entry into the imperial civil service. This was also schooling and accomplishment in proper conduct, the rites (*li*).

According to the practice of rites in interpersonal relations, this is a tripartite structure of reciprocity, of a compact between two relative equals under the authority of a third. The third is accepted by achieved reputation for social capacity, face, which includes the arts of persuasion and deception, or concealment and discretion, or it can be a deity with the reputation of responsiveness and righteousness.

One model of this hierarchical asymmetry is *bao*, the gift of beneficence that must be honoured but can never be matched, a gift relationship that is used to describe the mutual obligations of parent and child and the pledge that moves a god or ancestor to reciprocate. Mutual obligation is loyalty in both directions, a responsiveness of beneficence to the offering and plight of the petitioner. Its

negative is the horror of being excluded from authorization, of abandonment or of destruction by an offended and supremely powerful authority. That destructive force from above is analogous to the imperial use of force to correct, establishing its current orthodox version of hierarchy.

The less sacred version of the same hierarchy is performance of authority gained by the acquisition of the skills of face, the achievement of status in a hierarchy of statuses. It can be seen present at banquet tables, around which those in lower positions who are relatively equal in relation to one another sit, having worked out their exact position of authority in relation to one another. This is a hierarchy of unequal diads and triads, extended by analogy to larger scales, from father–son to emperor–subject, and a lot in between. It is a hierarchy that stimulates aspiration to acquire the social arts, including the conduct of ritual and interpersonal conduct, as well as the other arts of self-cultivation.

Chinese hierarchy is differential, in Professor Fei's famous concept *chaxu geju* of asymmetrical interpersonal relations. It is not constituted by endogamous groups, as is the Hindu Brahmanic hierarchy, but by individuals and their families, for whom there is more possibility for mobility through and within interpersonal relations and through individual and intergenerational acquisition of civilizational achievements, military and civil. It is a civilization that places most emphasis on the conduct of relations, *li*, always hierarchical, between tributary guest and emperor, between emperor and Heaven, between generations, female and male, junior and elder, living and dead. It is a civilization of the government of conduct, its correction, exemplary performance and enforcement. The spirituality of proper conduct is the subject of self-cultivation, one accomplished in the official arts of literacy and military prowess. But this can be either participation in rule within the imperial bureaucracy or in support of it as one of the ruling elite, or it can be in retreat from rule, in the accomplishments of ritual method (*fa*), Daoist or Buddhist, or the lesser religions of China: Muslim, Manichaeism, Christian. Since the compilation of the classic *Zhuangzi* and creation of the legend and the writings of Chu Yuan, both in the fourth century BCE (Before the Common Era, or BPE, Before the Present Era), there has been within Chinese civilization a tradition of the superiority of the renouncer over the upholder of convention and official literacy.

### **Finally, a history of structural transformation**

What I have described as the civilization of China is an end result, the accumulation of what was established after a number of cultural and social transformations. These transformations are too numerous to mention. But let me outline the few I think were most radical.

Sarah Allen (2007) provides convincing evidence to support an argument that bronze ritual vessels made in the city excavated at a place called Erlitou in north-central China (Henan province) – a palace and city with a north–south oriented grid pattern as all Chinese capitals had from then onwards – in the period 1300–1050 BCE were what she calls hegemonic over the whole of what came

a long time later to be the regions and provinces of the interior of the civilized world (*huanei*), which in English sinology is called China Proper. There were several centres of bronze production, but Erlitou bronzes had become dominant: a number of the shapes and key design features of the Erlitou bronzes were repeated and similarly used for ritual offerings of wine and food to ancestors. By the Zhou dynasty, ninth century BPE, inscriptions inside some of these bronze vessels show that they were for petitions to ancestors for protection and aid for promotion in the service of a ruling house (Khayutina 2002). In the same dynasty, the chief was for the first time named Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*). When the ruler of one of the states sharing this culture, the Qin state in the third century BPE, unified them all by conquest and standardized writing and much else, he called himself Emperor (*Huangdi*, a semi-divine title) and created a cosmocracy, which was also an empire and which has been the aspiration of rule in China ever since, a civilizational centre that is also a political centre. The same ideal of a single exemplary ruler may well have existed in Indian civilization, but it was not achieved until the Mughal empire of India, which was not Hindu nor did it rule through the Hindu cosmocracy.

From the Tang dynasty onwards (618–905), imperial codes protected private land ownership for all peasants and instituted equal inheritance among sons, so breaking up landed estates that were not lineage, princely or monastic trusts. This increased central imperial power. Tang governmental measures also included the spread to commoners of access to the political class through education in literacy and passing civil service examinations, but many positions were still reserved for princely and landed classes.

Privileges of birth for entry into the imperial bureaucracy were abolished completely in the southern Song dynasty of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In addition commoners, partly as a result of the long absorption of Buddhism, had acquired for themselves the privilege formerly confined to the families of magnates of landed estates and dynastic houses, to honour ancestors more than seven generations back. The southern Song imperial state endorsed this. Thenceforth, commoners would honour ancestors up to any number of generations further back, and it became possible for commoners to be buried in sites that, if auspicious enough, could produce descendants who would become emperors. From the eleventh to the seventeenth century, cults of address to local territorial gods, who are treated as emperors or as powerful generals commanding demonic force, both benign and fierce, in varying balances of saviour and protector, each with his own centre of pilgrimage in remote places, spread throughout the empire. They are other families' ancestors or they are renouncers, male and female, linking the world of the dead to the living with their exemplarily responsive powers.

Through these social transformations, the centring of the empire was accompanied by a proliferation of numinous centres of local self-organization through ritual. Throughout, from the bronze makers, oracle bone diviners, city and palace builders and ritual experts of the arts of achieving immortality in the late Bronze and early Iron Chinese ages onwards, there was also a proliferation of masters

teaching the arts of self-cultivation, music, martial arts and literacy to commoners as well as to rulers.

It is arguable that the first Ming emperor had a nation-building mission. He not only sharpened and garrisoned imperial borders but also set out to homogenize the civilization of the population within them. This included establishing official temples to focus territorial communities (*she*) on virtuous elders, the reading of community compacts and maintenance of altars for the care of orphan souls (*li*), well below the level of the county magistrate, in addition to the state cults replicating those of the capital at every administrative level. Midway through the dynasty, the costs of maintaining the *she* and *li* had become a severe drain on the imperial treasury and local gentry were expected to raise the funds for their maintenance. In the course of this devolution, local appropriation turned them into territorial cults whose deities and ghosts were supplicated for their demonic power to respond to local pleas and pledges, and which formed their own hierarchies on centres of devotion and aspiration. The same appropriation turned garrison command territories (*pu*) into territorial cults and organization points of local militias (Wang Mingming forthcoming).

This was a civilization of *fa*, to add to the civilization of conduct (*li*) and of renunciation, in which the subjects of the emperor imagined and made visible and concrete their own versions of an imperial and socially just rule. *Fa* is a wonderfully multivalent word: it refers to the capacity of ritual performed by experts to be magically effective – these ritual experts are lumped together now as Daoists; it also refers to the Buddhist dharma (rules of conduct and renunciation) and to law in general, as well as to method or capacity to get things done.

Similarly from the bottom, the second commercial revolution – as Valerie Hansen (2000: 405) has it – during the Ming dynasty increased the hierarchy of central places into regions and their cities of specialized production for exchange and of mercantile accumulation. They created a hierarchy of goods, amplified at their peak by the tribute trade sponsored by the imperial capital, the exotic and luxurious from overland and maritime trade routes and the fine goods of Chinese production for court and for external trade. But where previous Chinese empires were open, including within their regions and particularly at the broad peripheral regions of the southeast, southwest and northwest, semi-autonomous kingdoms and principalities, the first Ming emperor set standards of civilization and rule that sought to create homogeneity within clearly marked boundaries, and after the re-opening of the empire by the Yongle emperor (1403–1424), subsequent emperors followed the aim of defensive closure and homogenization.

By the end of the Ming dynasty and continuing through the next, the Qing dynasty, the imperial population had two spiritual standards: of *li* and of *fa*. Both were subject to expertise. The proper conduct of rituals in the state cults, for public events or for domestic rites of passage and mortuary rites, were and still are known and led by local literate and respected transmitters of protocol and tradition, called *lisheng*. They are above and beyond any particular religious doctrine or method. The effective conduct of rites known as *fa*, on the other hand, are con-

ducted by experts who are respected and feared because their skills are thought capable of making things happen through their mediation between the worlds of the living and the dead – be they gods, demons, souls or bodhisattvas. Confined to neither and going beyond both are the knowledges of crafts, healing, self-cultivation through the exercise and concentration of breathing and circuits of energy (*qi*) – similar to yoga – the common arts of theatre, story-telling, appreciation of landscape and the finer arts of calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry.

Whether seen from the top down, as a correction of *li*, or from the bottom up, as an aspiration to *li* and a reimagined empire of *fa*, this is a cosmology that is at once spiritual and political, unlike the Indian, in which the spiritual can be defined territorially but distinct from the territory and centres of political rule.

Of course, efforts of homogenization and correction are never successful, neither in the Ming dynasty nor the even more forceful and organized efforts of nation-building in more recent times. My point is not to measure their success but rather to say that in China the idea of a shared, centred and bounded civilization was spread, even though what was its content was never agreed by all and even though for nearly half the years of dynastic imperial rule the empire was divided into rivals for the unity of China.

### **The shift of world-system: humiliation and self-strengthening**

I am sure that here a history of Indian cities in the Mughal empire could be added and compared. They too were centres of world trade, which could be described as a world system whose centres of gravity were in East and South Asia, as well as in Italian and other European cities in the fifteenth century. One outcome of such a comparison might be the relative openness of the Mughal empire. Another would contrast the Chinese imperial expansion under the Qing dynasty combined with ever-sharper border controls in the face of increasing trade in products of European industrial capitalism with its equivalent in India, which was a British colonial empire. British Indian secular rule divided the empire into races and communities, defined by ‘religion’ among other categorizations that would eventually be called ‘ethnic’. Qing imperial rule was secular in another sense: it gave increasing emphasis to the study of the classics associated with the sage figure of Confucius as the standard for a government of conduct, above all other ways (*dao*) and teachings (*jiao*). This contrast sets the scene for contrasting histories of nationalism.

The Qing court declared Confucian supremacy over religions of any description. But this would soon be transformed, in the face of the humiliations wrought by the arms of the imperialist powers and their insistence on opening China to their opium and their other plantation crops and their industrial products. The reform movement started with new training of military forces, new state arsenals and a movement for self-strengthening (*zhiqiang*), not just self-cultivation (*zixiu*). The late Qing reformers, led by Kang Yuwei and Liang Qichao, whatever their differences, sought a spiritual and unifying renewal in their own readings of the classics associated with Confucius. They conceived of them as distillations of an

essence of the country (*guocui*), thus placing a national self where there had formerly been the centre and height of civilization.

But then new, Euro–American social sciences entered government and law when the revolutionary Republic of China was established in 1911, using the new term *zongjiao* to recognize ‘religions’ as governable and ‘superstition’ (*mixin*) as backward to be suppressed – including most local temples in the traditions of *fa*. Furthermore, the combination of prophetic and singular Confucianism with modern science favoured by Kang Yuwei did not prevail. A sharp distinction of science from religion, including Christianity, began also to exclude Confucianism. Confucianism continued to be considered a moral philosophy, an encapsulation of moral practices at the heart of China. But more radical reformers, following Liang Qichao’s gradual abandoning of Kang’s Confucianism in favour of social Darwinism and European enlightenment, considered Confucius to be a burden to be rejected in favour of a new morality, partly drawn from Chinese and partly from European history and its temporality of a progressive, teleological break with the past.

This teleology is the political project of reforming or revolutionary modernization, a project of industrialization and the restructuring of social relations by government through a self-strengthening and much enlarged state. Its homogenizing project, even with the strength of the Chinese Communist Party’s state power, has not been successful in its own terms. The ‘superstition’ of *fa* and various kinds of divination have revived with economic prosperity, as the aspirations of social mobility and their frustration prompt in new conditions the reconstruction and use of older ways of imagining and making concrete a powerful, responsive and rewarding authority. The sharing and contention over what constitutes a civilization of ‘us’, which is now that of a nation and of a disputed patriotism, do have a continuity with that of the Qing dynasty, in particular the governmental adoption of ‘Confucianism’ as the spiritual characteristic of Chineseness. There is further continuity in a governmentality that still assumes powers of correcting moral conduct. The discontinuity is its identification with a people in its relation to a state defined materially as a single history of a race and its project of modernization and centrality in a world system. And it is now in conjunction with a completely different economy, a far larger state and a new ruling ideology, all of which has had profound effects on Chinese domestic life and kinship.

With each structural transformation, what persists in the arts of self-cultivation and hierarchical aspiration conveys not just itself but a new polity and new statuses, always as an ideal against actual chaos and disorder. In the new temporality of national progressive time, namely of the modernizing project, more and then less revolutionary, what persists is another temporality alongside the modern, a temporality of responsive rule and returns to it. But it is now in a critical juxtaposition to the new institutions of state and economy and therefore itself conveys both the new and the older temporality.



## Summary

To Sahlins's series of structural transformations of alterity as he moves toward a galactic centre, I offer a complementary concept of civilization as a process of centring and aspiration. But more than that, I suggest that what is persistent is a distinctive way of learning and of transmission, the content of which can vary and change with the absorption of influences and information. It is a way of absorbing and responding to whatever is confronted and exploited opportunistically as confusion, through law, agreements and compacts, and economic organization, each a hierarchy of aspiration, or rather a number of like hierarchies of aspiration with their own centres, as well as the national–imperial centre.

Each civilizational spread is one of hierarchies and their variants, alternative hierarchies of aspiration born from social transformations.

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