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China as a “Civilization-State”: A Historical and Comparative Interpretation

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Abstract

Thanks to the publication of Martin Jacques’s *When China Rules the World*, the notion of China as a “civilization-state” has gained wide currency in China studies. This essay revisits his reading of Chinese civilization from a historical and comparative perspective. Historically, despite its exceptional longevity and continuity, Chinese civilization has gone through major changes, especially since China’s entrance into the modern world. In fact, modern China, while consciously or unconsciously abolishing and retaining different aspects of its traditions, has embraced some basic components from Western modernity. Hence the transformation of China into a modern nation – first by Sun Yat-sen’s ephemeral bourgeois revolution, and then by Mao Zedong’s decisive socialist revolution. Contemporary China continues to be shaped by the interaction between the remaining fragments from Chinese traditions and global, mainly Western, forces. Comparatively, the Western dichotomy between tradition and modernity simply does not apply to China. In many ways China has been modern (by Western standard) since ancient times. For instance, a largely secular state, a meritocratic bureaucracy, a highly self-governed civil society, a written language accessible to both literati and laypeople, a stratification system based on achieved rather than ascribed status, a cohesive culture open to multiculturalism, the idea and practice of educational equality, etc., which are fundamental to the formation of Western modernity, have long existed in China. On the other hand, Chinese society, premodern or modern, distinguishes itself by its, among other things, Confucian values, family morality in particular. Indeed, even today, Confucian familism (in forms of paternalism, nepotism, groupism, personalism, communalism, authoritarianism, etc.) is crucial to the operation of China’s power system, market economy, and everyday life. Therefore, as a function of its civilization, China is both similar to and dissimilar from the West. In defining China as a civilization-state or, more specifically, in identifying the role of Chinese civilization in contemporary China, we need to decipher Chinese civilization in both its continuity and discontinuity in Chinese history, and in both its similarities with and differences from its Western counterpart.

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1. Introduction

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The rapid development of China in the post-Mao era makes China a thematic and recurrent topic around the world. Much attention is paid to, for obvious reasons, the role the Chinese state plays in the Chinese “miracle”. Unfortunately, the lack of understanding is as striking as ever. Outsiders, Westerners in particular, habitually tend to judge China in their own terms. Thus, when a Westerner thinks about the Chinese state, such concepts as “Oriental despotism” (for premodern China), “communism”, “totalitarianism” and “authoritarianism” (for modern and contemporary China) readily come to mind. If the Western imagination of the Chinese state continued to be confined by those Eurocentric, stereotypical, and ideologically charged concepts, Westerners would have little chance to know the real China, in history or at present. There is a growing consensus that China needs to be understood in its own terms, or in the context of Chinese civilization. A remarkable effort is made by Martin Jacques’s bestseller *When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*. The title of the book is provocative enough. What really distinguishes it from many other China-related publications is its stress on the relevance of Chinese civilization. The book argues that the Chinese state is the embodiment and defender of Chinese civilization, and Chinese civilization is the secret of China’s recent resurrection. Jacques’s telling of the China story, however controversial, points to a plain but often ignored fact: China will remain mysterious if the role of Chinese civilization is left unsaid. In response to his reading of Chinese civilization or its contemporary manifestation, this essay attempts to interpret how Chinese civilization shapes the Chinese state from a historical and comparative perspective.

2. Chinese Civilization Defined by the Confucian Tradition

How Chinese civilization shapes the Chinese state has much to do with Confucianism, a defining factor of Chinese civilization. The Western term “Confucianism” may misleadingly suggest that the Confucian tradition began with Confucius. Confucius was certainly a key figure in the evolution of Confucianism, but he claimed himself to be “a believer in and lover of antiquity, a transmitter and not an innovator” (*Analects*: 7.1). Confucius lived in the late Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC). He once said that “The Zhou culture is founded on the two preceding dynasties. How splendidly rich is the Zhou culture! I follow the Zhou” (*Analects*: 3.14). The two preceding dynasties, the Xia and Shang Dynasty, started in 2070 BC! In other words, Chinese civilization had taken shape long before Confucius’s time. Interestingly, the Confucian nostalgia for the past has been part of the Confucian tradition per se. The Chinese word for Confucianism is *ruxue* (儒学), literally intellectuals’ teachings, which more accurately reflects the history and the nature of the Confucian tradition.

The State in Relation to Religion: All civilizations, with the peculiar exception of China, are religious – at least in premodern times. As the dominant social thought in premodern China, Confucianism is generally recognized as a this-worldly intellectual tradition, a tradition of humanism and rationalism. Of course, there were various religions, native and naturalized, in premodern China. What makes China unique is its lack of state religion (Xia, 2011). Regardless of the ruler’s private belief, no religion had or has ever been established as state religion. Therefore, different religions may, as they do, coexist in China, and people may choose to believe in any religion or no religion at all. If secularism means the separation of religion and state, and if secularism means the freedom of belief and unbelief, then Chinese civilization has been a secular civilization, and the Chinese state has been a secular state since ancient times. The lack of state religion in China excludes the possibility for the state to be legitimized by a divine transcendent being. In other words, the legitimacy of the state in premodern China had to be based on the human world – the ruler and/or the ruled. It should be noted that the Chinese idea of Heaven is not exactly the Chinese equivalent of the Christian God (or any god): in the Chinese context, what is transcendent is imminent or intrinsic to humanity. “Heaven” makes sense only in its unity with humanity, which is achieved not by or in Heaven, but in this world via human beings’ self-cultivation and self-perfection.

Rule of Virtue vs. Rule of Law: A legitimate ruler in China should be, at least in theory, a virtuous person. In Confucius’s words, “Let a ruler base his government upon virtuous principles, and he will be like the pole-star, which remains steadfast in its place, while all the host of stars turn towards it” (*Analects*, 2.1). The Confucian world would stand by Plato in the Plato/Aristotle debate with regard to what defines the best form of government. From a Confucian perspective, the rule of law is necessary, whereas the rule of virtue is preferable. The Chinese ideal of virtuous rulership is well conveyed in the popular legends of Yao and Shun, two sagely kings in the early stage of Chinese civilization. Yao and Shun are known both for their personal virtues and for their practice of *shanrang* (禅让). *Shanrang* is an abdication and succession system under which the current ruler would voluntarily relinquish the

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