

*Zhang Weiwei*

## China, the Civilizational State Narrative and its Implications

*Abstract.* This paper examines the rise of China in the context of the civilizational state discourse and its international ramifications. It traces the evolution of this discourse and explores the key features of China's rise as a civilizational state and its impact on China's state behavior both at home and abroad. The civilizational state discourse is apparently gaining momentum with the rise of non-Western powers and relative decline of the West, as it challenges the very foundation of the Euro-centric meta-narratives of liberalism, modernity, democracy, nation-state, "universal values" and "end of history" thesis.

*Keywords:* history of China, civilizational state, the Chinese civilization, civilizational state discourse, China and the West.

*Author:* Zhang Weiwei, Professor of International Relations and Director of the China Institute at Fudan University.

**Чжан Вэйвэй**

## Китай, нарратив цивилизационного государства и его значение

*Аннотация.* В этой статье рассматривается подъем Китая в контексте цивилизационного государственного дискурса и его международных ответвлений. В работе отслеживается эволюция данного дискурса и исследуются ключевые черты подъема Китая как цивилизационного государства, а также влияние дискурса на поведение Китая как государственного актора внутри страны и за рубежом. Дискурс цивилизационного государства, по-видимому, становится все более популярным с подъемом незападных держав и относительным упадком стран Запада, поскольку бросает вызов самой основе европоцентристских метанарративов: либерализму, модернизму, демократии, национальным государствам, «универсальным ценностям» и тезису о «конце истории».

*Ключевые слова:* история Китая, цивилизационное государство, китайская цивилизация, дискурс цивилизационного государства, Китай и Запад.

*Автор:* Чжан Вэйвэй, профессор международных отношений, директор Института изучения Китая Фуданьского университета.

From a country that once suffered foreign invasion and occupation for a century, China now stands as the world's second largest economy, or the largest if measured by purchasing power parity, and China is now also the world's largest manufacturing and trading nation and a leading power in the new technological revolution. A variety of interpretations has since emerged on how China has made it, and this author has long maintained that this is due to the nature of China as a civilizational state and its unique model of development. This paper briefly explores the rise of China in the context of the civilizational state discourse and its international ramifications.

## 1. Civilization State or Civilizational State?

In a paper published in 2010, this author submitted a view that the rise of China is not that of an ordinary country, but a country *sui generis*, a civilizational state (文明型国家), which is an amalgam of the world's oldest continuous civilization and a huge modern state, and it's also the rise of a new model of development and a new political discourse which questions many of the Western assumptions about democracy, good governance and human rights<sup>1</sup>.

Seminal works abound on civilizations, such as the *Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler, *A Study of History* by Arnold Toynbee, *History of Civilizations* by Fernand Braudel, *Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies* by Liang Shuming and *Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order* by Samuel Huntington which calls our attention to civilizations as a primordial factor for potential conflicts. Yet there is little study on the amalgam of an ancient civilization and a huge modern state. Huntington foresaw clashes between some states of a civilization and others of another civilization, but did not foresee the rise of civilizational states (or “one-modern-state-one-civilization”) and its ramifications for the world.

For this author, the concept of civilizational state was conceived in part to dispel the widely-held perception or misperception (unfortunately it remains) of China as a Communist state moving on the wrong side of history as former American President Bill Clinton asserted, and in part to distinguish it from a more conventional and then prevailing academic description of China as civilization-state (文明-国家 or 文明国家), which meant that while China's nation-state was in the process of formation, China as a civilization-state had lasted for thousands of years, at least from Emperor Qin Shihuang's first unification of China in 221 BC, and it viewed the Chinese civilization more as a burden than asset for its modern state-building, as shown in Harvard scholar Joseph R. Levenson's work *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*. It was widely held among many Sinologists that throughout the 20th century, China's history was essentially a process of transition from the idea of “heaven” to the idea of “state” or from civilization-state to nation-state, American political scientist Lucian Pye even described China as “a civilization pretending to be a nation-state.”

---

<sup>1</sup> The paper entitled “The China Model: a Civilizational State Perspective” was presented on 7 Nov. 2010 at the 4th World Forum on China Studies held in Shanghai. URL: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/41/10/Document/798876/798876.htm> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

British scholar Martin Jacques published in 2009 an influential yet controversial work entitled *When China Rules the World* and has significantly gone beyond the Euro-centricity and gives the concept of civilization-state a neutral and more objective tone by stating that “there are many civilizations — Western civilization is one example — but China is the only civilization-state. It is defined by its extraordinarily long history and also its huge geographic and demographic scale and diversity. The implications are profound: Unity is its first priority, plurality the condition of its existence which is why China could offer Hong Kong ‘one country two systems’, a formula alien to a nation-state.

He holds that “the Chinese state enjoys a very different kind of relationship with society compared with the Western state. It enjoys much greater natural authority, legitimacy and respect, even though not a single vote is cast for the government. The reason is that the state is seen by the Chinese as the guardian, custodian and embodiment of their civilization. The duty of the state is to protect its unity. The legitimacy of the state therefore lies deep in Chinese history. This is utterly different from how the state is seen in Western societies” [Jacques, 2009].

Yet despite his break with Euro-centric perception, Jacques still perceives a tension between the nation-state and the civilization-state, and this tension may, he argues, lead China in different directions. For instance, he hypothesizes that China may eventually revive certain form of the tributary system, characteristic of China’s past relations with its supposedly inferior neighbors, and the Chinese sense of racial superiority may pose a challenge to the existing international order.

To this author, however, today’s China is a civilizational state, which amalgamates the civilization-state and the nation-state, and combines the strength of the both. This fact itself highlights the Chinese civilization’s known capacity and tradition for creating synergies. As a modern state, China accepts sovereign equality and prevailing conceptions of human rights. China is unlikely to restore the tributary system, nor will China embrace racism. China is first of all a modern state, but unique due to many features originating from its civilization. This is also the key conceptual difference between civilizational state and civilization-state. The former represents an amalgam of an old civilization and a modern nation state, while the latter often reflects the tension between the two.

However, an interesting evolution has since occurred: except for some academics, the distinction between civilizational state and civilization-state has been blurred to such an extent that they are used almost interchangeably now, which perhaps reflects a trend this author had predicted in *Zhongguo Zhenhan* (the China Wave) that the world would move increasingly beyond nation-states in the direction of forming a kind of civilizational communities or even civilizational states, as with the growth of various regional groupings [Zhang, 2012].

## **2. China as a Civilizational State**

China’s rapid rise, or rather its return to its historic global primacy, has dominated much of international discourse on civilizational state, and in this sense, China may be considered as the ideal type (not in the strict Weberian sense) of civilizational state, i.e.

an amalgam of the world's oldest continuous civilization and a huge modern state, which by itself is a product of hundreds of states amalgamated into one over its long history, and this author concludes that the Chinese civilizational state has the notable features of the “four supers” and “one blend”, i.e. (i) a super-large population, (ii) a super-vast territory, (iii) super-long traditions and (iv) super-rich cultures, and each of these features is a blend of ancient and modern.

With a super-large population since the ancient time, China has an unparalleled scale of almost everything, from the scale of the market to the size of the economy and the number of well-educated population, for instance, China now produces more scientists and engineers a year than the Western countries combined, and this fact alone changes the world forever, as China now leads many global industries, ranging from electric cars to AI, quantum technology and 5G telecommunications.

Concerning super-vast territory, a continent by itself which is inherited from its ancient times, but it's covered with the world's largest and most advanced networks of bullet trains and highways, with the first-rate digital infrastructure.

As for its super-long traditions, being the world's oldest continuous civilization, it has allowed China's traditions to evolve, develop and adapt in virtually all branches of human knowledge and practices. For instance, the West is critical of China's one-party system, yet to most Chinese, it's nothing extraordinary: since its first unification in 221BC, China has mostly practiced governance by a unified ruling entity, otherwise the country disintegrate, as was the case of China copying the American political model following the 1911 Republican Revolution and ending in warlords fighting each other with millions of lives lost.

Furthermore, this unified ruling entity has been sustained by a system of meritocracy, with officials selected through public exams (the Keju) since the Sui Dynasty (581—618AD). This system has now been adapted into what can be called “selection+election” system. China's top echelon leaders have almost all served at least twice as party secretaries or governors of a province, which means, given the size of China's population, they have administered at least 100 million people, before being promoted to their current positions. As a result, China's top echelon leadership is obviously among the most competent in the world.

Likewise, the tradition of a unified ruling entity has also carried with it a holistic approach to political governance. This author holds that most Western political parties may better be described as partisan interest parties, while the Communist Party of China is largely a holistic interest party, which explains why China is one of the few countries capable of formulating and executing medium-to-long-term plans from five to ten years to half a century and longer.

China has one of the world's richest cultural heritages from arts to literature to architecture to statecraft and more, and it has a rich reservoir of a unique political culture, which, for instance, prioritizes people's livelihood (minben 民本 or “民为邦本, 本固邦宁”). In today's context, this means whatever the state pursues, political, economic or social policies, must all boil down to deliver tangible benefits, material and non-material, to the people, and the China model values what the system delivers to the people rather than indulgence in rhetoric, as the case with many Western countries.

There are also two important concepts of *minyì* (民意) and *minxīn* (民心) for political governance. *minyì* refers to “public opinion,” and the *minxīn* refers approximately to “the hearts and minds of the people,” and the twin concepts were first put forward by Mencius in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC but highly relevant for today’s internet age. Public opinions may be fleeting and changing by hours with today’s social media, yet *minxīn*, or “hearts and minds of the people” are mostly stable and lasting. So despite the rise of populism in China like elsewhere, the Chinese state is on the whole capable of “ruling by *minxīn*”, thus allowing the country to advance beyond populism and short-termism so prevalent in the West and pursuing hard but needed reforms in the interest of most Chinese.

It follows that as far as democracy is concerned, the Chinese approach proceeds from the *dao* (道), or the overall purpose of democracy, in the context of Chinese culture, is to achieve good governance, and then the *shu* (术) which means specific forms and procedures. The Chinese believe that the ultimate test of a good political system is not procedural democracy, but to what extent it can achieve good governance or the substance of democracy. This author has therefore long advocated for a paradigm shift from “democracy vs. autocracy” to “good governance vs. bad governance”, and we should encourage different political models to compete to see which model delivers better governance as judged by their peoples.

Indeed, if one adopts the criteria of Abraham Lincoln, namely, government of the people, by the people and for the people as a measurement for good governance or democracy, virtually all leading credible international surveys reveal that China has done better than the US, for instance, Democracy Perception Index 2020 conducted by Dalia Research, 87 % Chinese believe their government works for majority, while only 48 % Americans think so for their country, and 52 % Americans surveyed believe the American government serves a minority<sup>1</sup>. China today has a life expectancy higher than the United States, 78.2 years old for China and 76.1 for the US in 2021 largely due to the two countries’ different approaches to fighting the Covid<sup>2</sup>. China’s official data shows that 90 % China’s civil servants come from ordinary family background<sup>3</sup>, while Nobel-laureate Joseph Stiglitz describes US as a country of the 1 %, by the 1 % and for the 1 %. The latest Pew survey found that 72 % Americans no longer think the US as a good model of democracy for others<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Democracy Perception Index 2020 by Rasmussen Global and Dalia Research. Newsweek. URL: <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-copenhagen-democracy-summit/dpi-2020/> (accessed: 20.02.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Fact Check: Has China Overtaken U.S. in Life Expectancy for First Time? 09.08.2022. URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/china-us-life-expectancy-birth-2021-fact-check-1740991> (accessed: 20.02.2023).

<sup>3</sup> 尹蔚民出席全国行政机关公务员管理工作会议并讲话尹蔚民出席全国行政机关公务员管理工作会议并讲话 Yinweimin chuxi quanguo xingzheng jiguan gongwuyuan guanli gongzuo huiyi bing jianghua [Yin Weimin attended and delivered a speech at the the National Conference on the Management of Civil Servants of Administrative Organs]. 09.01.2013. URL: [https://www.gov.cn/govweb/gzdt/2013-01/09/content\\_2308066.htm](https://www.gov.cn/govweb/gzdt/2013-01/09/content_2308066.htm) (accessed: 19.02.2023).

<sup>4</sup> Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety. Pew Research Center, 07.12.2021. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety/> (accessed: 14.02.2023).

### 3. The International Implications of China's Rise and its Civilizational State Narrative

The rise of China as a civilizational state has global implications, as China is so much different from the United States in terms of way of thinking and international behavior. The so-called Thucydides's trap outlined by Harvard scholar Graham Allison assumes that a rising power and a status quo power are bound to conflict or even fight a war with each other [Allison, 2017].

Yet, as a civilizational state, China has its unique cultural traditions which are on the whole far more inclusive and long-range thinking than the American culture. The Americans have a mentality of treating other countries as "either a friend or foe", while the Chinese treating others as "a friend or potential friend". This difference has been rooted in vastly different religious traditions, and the Chinese one is far more inclusive and syncretic than the Western or American one, which to a great extent explains why there was a clear absence of religious wars in China's long history, compared with Europe's endless religious wars/conflicts over millennia. In China, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and more have on the whole co-existed well and drawn on each other's strength. This absence of religious wars was a source of inspiration for many European Enlightenment giants such as Voltaire, Leibniz and Spinoza.

Along with its inclusive and syncretic culture, China does not have a messianic tradition to convert others or a militarist tradition for conquest, as compared with the Western powers. After all China is a country that built the Great Wall to ward off aggression, rather than conquering other countries. Even when the Chinese military power was dozens times more powerful than Europe, for instance, when China's Admiral Zheng He made his many overseas voyages in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, about 80 years before the Columbus discovery of the Americas, Chinese did not colonize others, but trade with them.

This tradition has been reflected in the difference of state behaviors between China and the United States. When the US became the world's largest economy at around 1890s, it launched the war against Spain and occupied the Philippines and Cuba. In contrast, China became the world's largest economy in 2014 (by purchasing power parity) with military capacity to easily take back all the occupied islands in the South China Sea today, yet China has chosen not to do so and prefers a negotiated solution to its territorial disputes with its neighbors. When China first tested its nuclear device in 1964, China declared that it will never be the first to use nuclear weapons nor will it use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. Of all the major powers, China has perhaps the highest threshold for the use of force, a tradition originating from Sun Tzu's renowned motto on prudence in the use of military force, and China has not fired a single shot over the past four decades while its extraordinary rise has occurred.

The Thucydides's trap is therefore not applicable to China. In fact the 16 cases cited by Allison in his book are all from European history or countries such as imperial Japan, which had been strongly influenced by then prevailing Western zero-sum militarism. Yet, as a civilizational state, which is first of all a modern state, China has built up a formidable modern defense capability, including powerful nuclear deterrence, and the country has set out clear redlines which no foreign country should cross. It's also worth re-

membering that the Cold War was cold between the US and the USSR, yet it was hot between the US and China over the Korean battlefield in the early 1950s and the Vietnamese one in the 1960s, when China's redlines had been crossed, a lesson that the US should bear in mind.

The narrative of civilizational state has generated global ramifications over the past decade. The two often quoted paragraphs from this author's work on civilizational state are as follows: (1) "If the ancient Roman Empire had stayed united till now and transformed into a modern state, Europe could be a medium-sized civilizational state or if dozens of countries of the Islamic world today could integrate into a unified modern state, it would also be a civilizational state with over 1 billion people, but this seems an unlikely prospect". This observation questions the foundation of the prevailing Western narrative on nation state being modern state, by asserting a civilizational state as representing not only modern but also arguably a more sophisticated and advanced type of state, representing perhaps the future direction of state development.

(2) "A civilizational state has exceedingly strong historical and cultural traditions. It does not easily imitate or follow other models, be they Western or otherwise... As an endogenous civilization capable of generating its own standards and values, it makes unique contributions to the world civilizations... A civilizational state can exist and evolve independently of the endorsement or acknowledgment from others. Its political and economic models are different from others in many aspects." This observation questions the very Euro-centric foundation of the meta-narratives of liberalism, "universal values" and "end of history" thesis. Liberal ideas, whatever their intellectual appeal, derived their ultimate force from the once unrivaled economic, military and technological power of the West.<sup>1</sup> The key message from China's successful rise as a civilizational state is that each and every nation should be allowed to explore its own way to prosperity and success by proceeding from its own national conditions and cultural traditions, free from external interference.

An Economist essay published in early 2020 claimed that "the term is in vogue. Chinese academics herald China as the world's sole civilisation-state, rather than an old-hat, 19th-century nation-state. Vladimir Putin, however, has hopped on the bandwagon, declaring that Russia's status as a civilisation-state prevented the country 'from dissolving in this diverse world'. Indian commentators have long wrestled with whether their country is one, too. Other potential candidates for civilisation-state status include the United States and even Turkey. Another name is rarely mentioned, but should be added to this growing list: the EU".<sup>2</sup>

Today, major non-Western powers like China, Russia and India all claim their civilizational state identity, although they may differ on the exact definition of civilizational state, yet they share one commonality that they are respectively a unique civilization,

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, A. Roussinos, "The Irresistible Rise of the Civilisational-State", Unherd, 06.08.2020. URL: <https://unherd.com/2020/08/the-irresistible-rise-of-the-civilisation-state/> (accessed: 10.02.2023); A. Ganguly, Rise of civilisational states, Millenniumpost, 23.10.2019. URL: <https://www.millenniumpost.in/opinion/rise-of-civilisational-states-380945> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Huntington's Disease and the Clash of Civilisation-States, The Economist, 02.01.2020. URL: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/01/02/huntingtons-disease-and-the-clash-of-civilisation-states> (accessed: 14.02.2023).

dissatisfied with the Western imposition of its values on them in the name of “universal values” and they resist the Western interference in their internal affairs. These rising civilizational states are indeed challenging the liberal international order.

The idea of civilizational state seems also appealing to many in the West. Facing with the daunting challenges of Europe’s “re-nationalization”, French president Macron almost openly admired the ideal of civilizational state when he referred to China, Russia and India as such examples and declared that France’s historic destiny was to guide Europe into a civilizational renewal.<sup>1</sup> For the Right, the model of civilizational state is viewed as one way to defend traditional values and resist the excess of ultra-liberalism and perceived cultural decadence, and for the Left, the model shows due respect for indigenous cultures and traditions as a way to reject Western imperialism and neo-liberalism.

Indeed, the rising civilizational states of Eurasia have defined themselves mostly against the liberal West, while many in the West are now striving to define the Western identity. The West may well have more to deconstruct and construct, with its identity politics evolving into prevalent crises. For one thing, the liberal West has long preached universal values beyond national or civilizational boundaries, i.e. these values are universal, neither Western, nor European, nor Judeo-Christian, yet as European political scientist Bruno Mações has argued that “the liberal West” is now dead, having caused “a global rootlessness”.<sup>2</sup>

However, can the West exist as an independent civilizational entity? British scholar Christoph Coker notes, “neither the Greeks nor sixteenth-century Europeans... regarded themselves as ‘Western’, a term which dates back only to the late eighteenth century” [Coker, 2019]. Bruno Mações asserts that some advocate a return to Europe’s Enlightenment, yet it was the Enlightenment liberalism with its universalizing tendencies leading the West to its current dilemma, which have severed the West, and Europe particularly, from its own cultural roots. The same author notes “Western societies have sacrificed their specific cultures for the sake of a universal project” [Mações, 2020]. Indeed, a culturally, socially and politically divided West, as is today, still has an uphill battle for shaping a common civilizational identity, not to mention a civilizational state status.

Furthermore, if liberalism is no longer so sure about final truths, a renewed competition of ideas and statecraft could indeed be a good idea. Many Western discussions on civilizational state are still somewhat misguided by a zero-sum attitude, rather than the civilization state’s more open, inclusive and win-win outlook, and after all a civilizational state could not have survived for so long without such an outlook. And indeed, a civilizational state by its nature is open to other cultures and civilizations, and it looks beyond Euro-centric liberalism or the ethnic or religious nationalism, and in this sense it may well be the third way beyond liberalism and nationalism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Discours du President de la Repubilique a la conference des ambassadeurs, Elysee, 27.08. 2019, URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/09/01/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-a-l-occasion-de-la-conference-des-ambassadrices-et-des-ambassadeurs> (accessed: 14.02.2023).

<sup>2</sup> The Allure of the Civilizational State, The National Interest, 05.05.2022, URL: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/allure-civilizational-state-202230> (accessed: 15.02.2023).



As is with China, over the past decades, China has learnt so much from the West (and many others) and will continue to do so for its own benefit, and it may be time now for the West, to use Deng Xiaoping's famous phrase, to "emancipate the mind" and learn from a civilizational state's approach and ideas. This is not only to avoid a possible collision between the West and China or other civilizational states, but also to overcome the obvious weaknesses imbedded in the Western model and its narratives and enrich the world's collective wisdom in tackling the challenges and crises facing mankind.

In a long-term perspective, as the global order becomes increasingly more horizontal than vertical, and as the West and the rest are more on a par with each other in terms of wealth, power and ideas, one is likely to witness the rise of more civilizational communities or states, self-claimed or genuine, including most likely a Western one, whose so-called "universal values" may well be reshaped or even replaced by certain common values such as peace, development, international solidarity and one human community, and to this author, all states should make their efforts and contributions to this noble endeavor in the interest of all mankind.

---

## References

Jacques, M. (2009). *When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, The Penguin Press, New York.

Zhang, W. (2012). *Zhongguo zhenhan: Yige "wenming xing guojia" de jueqi* 中国震撼：一个“文明型国家”的崛起 [The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State]. Shanghai People's Press, Shanghai, 2011, p.244. (In Chinese).

Coker, C. (2019). *The Rise of the Civilizational State*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Maçães, B. (2020). *The Attack Of The Civilization State*, Noema Magazine, 15.06.2020. URL: <https://www.noemamag.com/the-attack-of-the-civilization-state/> (accessed: 10.02.2023).

Allison G. (2017). *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides's Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Поступила в редакцию: 22.02.2023. Received: 22 February 2023.

Принята к публикации: 14.03.2023. Accepted: 14 March 2023.