

Disentangling the civilizational evolution of China

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Throughout history, the world has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous ancient civilizations. Among them, six prominent civilizations stand out: Egypt, Babylon, India, China, Greece, and Maya. While Chinese civilization may not be the oldest, it distinguishes itself by its remarkable continuity. Unlike the other five civilizations, which experienced significant interruptions, Chinese civilization has endured for over 5,000 years without any major breaks. It has followed its own unique trajectory, remaining intact and never giving rise to a separate, independent civilization, despite its continuous assimilation of new influences. This uninterrupted development has resulted in a fascinating juxtaposition between Chinese civilization and its contemporary counterparts in the Western world.

Civilizational communications

The value and vitality of a civilization are derived not only from its internal dynamics but also from its engagement and interactions with other civilizations. Egypt, Babylon, and Greece faced each other across the Mediterranean Sea, with the most frequent exchanges between them. Greece in particular, situated at the crossroads of Eastern and European cultures, made remarkable cultural achievements by assimilating external cultural elements such as Egyptian religion, Persian philosophy, the Phoenician alphabet, Babylonian astronomy, and more. Even during the period between the 3rd century BCE and 1st century BCE, following the decline of Greece, the languages, writings, customs, and political systems in the eastern Mediterranean region were heavily influenced by Greek culture, giving rise to the so-called "Hellenistic period."

In Asia, China's Confucianism, Buddhism, calendar system, law, currency, poetry, writing, and other civilizational elements spread across Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other countries, forming the so-called "Cultural Circle of Chinese Characters." China's Four Great Inventions even spread to the West via the Silk Road, playing a significant role in the social changes and development of medieval Europe. China's ability to absorb cultural influences from other civilizations was somewhat limited due to vast geographical distance from each other. It is important for us to acknowledge the historical reality of China's interactions with other ancient civilizations. Prior to the "Great Voyage," China primarily exported cultural elements to other regions, particularly Asia, while importing relatively few. One notable exception was the introduction of Buddhism from India, which had a profound impact on traditional Chinese culture. This dynamic has contributed to the independent growth of Chinese civilization within

the geographic confines of East Asia, allowing itself to evolve along a distinctive path.

Socio-economic development

China's more than 5,000 years of socio-economic development can be roughly divided into three sequential stages: the stage from the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BCE), Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) to the Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties, from the Warring States Period (476–221 BCE) to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912), and modern times.

The socio-economic development of the first stage, or the Xia, Shang, and Zhou eras, featured bronze casting and the use of bronzeware, which represented the highest level of productivity at that time. Land ownership during this period was primarily organized under the "well-field system" [each unit of the well-field system was divided between eight peasant families. Each family had its own peripheral field around a central shared field, and all the families jointly worked a ninth central plot for their lord]. Handicrafts and commerce were in their early stages of development, with most craftsmen and merchants being subordinate to the government and nobility. The basic unit of society was the clan, and rulers exercised territorial administration from the top down by enfeoffing their clan relatives and fellow warriors as vassals. The Zhou upheld the aforementioned clan-based social units through the implementation of patriarchal and ritual systems.

The period from the Warring States Period to the Ming and Qing lasted for approximately 2,000 years. From the Warring States Period to the middle Tang Dynasty (618–907), the widespread use of iron tools, the south-pointing chariot [an ancient Chinese two-wheeled vehicle that carried a movable pointer to indicate the south, no matter how the chariot turned], quenching, and other crucial inventions represented the growing productivity of the time. Successive dynasties, including the Western Han and Tang, allocated and regulated land, manifesting the nature of the state's ownership of land.

From the mid-Tang to the early Qing, significant social changes occurred. Firstly, agricultural techniques improved, resulting in the widespread cultivation of commercial crops such as rice and tea. Porcelain and iron smelting advanced. The circulation of currency replaced the integrated use of silk and coins [silk was once used as a currency during the Tang]. Cities and towns multiplied, the population increased, and the economic center of the state shifted from the north to the south. Secondly, the transfer and consolidation of land ownership became increasingly prevalent. The state basically gave up administrative regulation and intervention in land occupation, and the [private] ownership of large-scale land and the tenancy system were legalized.



The four-goat square zun from the Shang Dynasty, unearthed in Hunan Province, is famous for its belly adorned with four big-horned goats. Photo: Ren Guanhong/CSST

Thirdly, the status of merchants improved significantly. Merchants thrived again and began to play an important role in society. Lastly, the imperial examination system matured, replacing the previous civil service recruitment system based on social class with a system based on merit. The imperial examination system facilitated the selection and recruitment of literati and gentry, and promoted social mobility. As the scale of the examination expanded and more candidates failed to pass, many scholar-officials and gentry returned to their hometowns, building their careers upon local networks.

The third stage saw a transition from "tradition" to "modernity." The year 1500 is an important turning point in human history. Western Europe, which was expanding overseas on a large scale, began to connect regions, ethnic groups, countries, and civilizations that were once isolated from each other. The spread and popularity of Western knowledge during the Ming and Qing had already heralded the basic direction of the world historical process.

However, it was not until the Opium War in the 1840s that a truly significant turning point occurred in Chinese history. While gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society, China was also fighting to save itself from peril. These two synchronous processes shaped the trajectory of modern Chinese civilization. The Self-Strengthening Movement, initiated in the 1860s, marked the beginning of China's transformation from a traditional agricultural civilization to a modern industrial civilization. Over the course of approximately three decades, the People's Republic of China made significant strides in establishing a relatively independent and complete industrial system. Following 1979, China entered a period of rapid modernization. Despite numerous

obstacles along the way, the process of industrialization or transformation into modern civilization has persisted without interruption.

Intellectual and cultural evolution

Throughout its more than 5,000-year history, the evolution of ideology, culture, and society in China has largely progressed in tandem. However, during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the previous ritual system nearly collapsed amidst intense social changes. The government's monopoly on education was disrupted, leading to the emergence of private schools and literati who represented various schools of thought. This transformative period in Chinese intellectual history, known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought," brought about unprecedented prosperity. The debates and exchanges among the various schools of thought brought about a flourishing academic culture, constructed the basic framework of traditional Chinese culture, and reached a peak that later generations found challenging to surpass. Unfortunately, this intellectual golden age came to an end with the purported burning of classics and the execution of Confucian scholars under the orders of Qin Shi Huang, as well as Emperor Wu of Han's dismissal of the Hundred Schools of Thought and his adoption of the principles of Confucianism as the state philosophy.

The convergence of the "Three Teachings" refers to the convergence and integration of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This phenomenon emerged as the first significant response of traditional Chinese culture to the introduction of Buddhism from India, which challenged the dominant position of Confucianism as the sole state ideology. Therefore, it can be regarded as the second major intellectual and cultural movement following the era of the "Hun-

dered Schools of Thought." More precisely, the convergence of the Three Teachings refers to the harmonious coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, forming an entity of traditional thought and culture that became prominent during the Tang and Song dynasties.

Confucianism, mainly developed by Confucius and Mencius, initially focused on moral ethics. However, influenced by other schools of thought such as Yin-Yang philosophy in the Han Dynasty, Confucianism began to emphasize the unity of heaven and humanity. It was through the influence of Buddhism and Taoism that Confucian philosophy underwent significant refinement. Nevertheless, the ultimate revitalization of Confucianism relied on the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming eras. In other words, the Confucianism we discuss today is not the same as the one prevalent during the time of Confucius and Mencius, but rather Neo-Confucianism. The rise of Neo-Confucianism, serving as the third intellectual boom, not only revitalized early Confucianism but also bridged the gap with Buddhism and Taoism, ultimately leading to the sublimation of Confucian philosophy.

In modern times, the Self-Strengthening Movement featured the "debate over Chinese and Western learning." During the Hundred Days' Reform [which declared that China needed more than "self-strengthening" and that innovation must be accompanied by institutional and ideological change], another "debate over new and old learning" [the "new learning" mainly refers to modern knowledge from the West while the "old learning" was centered on traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucian cannons] came into fashion. Then came the "debate between new and old culture" [the "new culture" mainly focused on Western ideas, particularly science and democracy, with the "old culture" represented by traditional Chinese ethics, philosophy, and literature] during the May Fourth Movement. The rise and fall of intellectual trends sheds light on the evolution of Chinese intellectual and cultural changes. Despite the diverse topics of these intellectual debates, they collectively reveal a consistent trajectory. The emergence of the "new learning" during the late Qing and the "new culture" proposed in the May Fourth Movement established a causal relationship in historical evolution. The May Fourth Movement, under the banner of "science" and "democracy," facilitated the popularization of Marxism and contributed to constructing a new cultural system. As a result, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the process of China's modernization set sail.

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