

# China's National Identity from Historical Perspectives: The Return of the Chinese Empire

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# China's National Identity from Historical Perspectives: The Return of the Chinese Empire\*

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## Introduction

Since China began to challenge the US-led world order in earnest, discussions on China's national identity have become more frequent and intense, first in the West and recently in Korea. These discussions are mostly led by experts in geopolitics and China policies.<sup>1</sup> The increasing interest in China's identity reflects the political, economic, and military needs to respond agilely to strategic competition with China, but an in-depth investigation also reveals the following two reasons behind it.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Moon Ki analyzes the limitations of geopolitical studies on China's national identity as follows. The West's mainstream approach bases the factors for the rise of China and its resulting national identity as a world power on the premise that China would follow the same path as Western countries to modernization and becoming a great power. This approach explains both the rise of China and its national identity as a world power afterward in the context of “modernization following the Reform and Opening.” Such an approach leads to an apparent limitation, Lee emphasizes, since it overgeneralizes Western-centered historical experiences and theories and inadequately explains China's unique situation. Lee Moon Ki, “Junguk minjokjueui eui se gaji teukjin gwa gukga jeongcheseong” [Three properties of Chinese nationalism and national identity: From the perspective of historical institutionalism], *Gukjejeongchi nonchong* [The Korean Journal of International Studies] 54-3 (2014): 181.

First, there was a misjudgment by the United States. The US was “convinced” that China would transform itself by following the global standards and ultimately be incorporated into the US-led universal value system and global order. At the start of the 21st century, however, the US could not but acknowledge that this “conviction” was wrong.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it was compelled to reexamine the identity of China and reestablish its knowledge regarding China. Second, the rise of China calls for an adjustment of its premise. With Xi Jinping’s proclamation of a “New Era,” China has entered the period in which it designs the world order in terms of its own values, norms, and institutions, as well as its own concepts and philosophies, as opposed to those of the West or the U.S.<sup>3</sup> China is now challenging Western civilization, offering alternatives to Western ways, methods, and thought. This “tremendous shift” in China has been accomplished in forty years since its Reform and Opening, and in seventy years since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC). The rise of China has forced the West to face not just a hegemonic competitor but a challenge to its own civilization. Thus, the West needs to fundamentally redefine China as its strategic competitor and abandon its “intellectual arrogance”<sup>4</sup> over the country.

Then what is China’s national identity? This question has a deep historical origin and contains intricate elements. It is also as inadequate a question as “What is China?” for it is hard to give a tangible answer to “What.” John K. Fairbank thus avoided giving a definite answer to this question, referring to China’s “remarkable inertia” as an impediment to the

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<sup>2</sup> US scholars and strategists on China base their research on the premise that Western/American values and norms are the “only universal” ones. This premise leads to the presumption that China would eventually accept Western/American norms, standards, and order, given time. With this belief, they have interpreted China in terms of Western/American concepts and ways of thinking and judged that China would transform itself in the same way as they have. Thus, they planned and execute policies on China accordingly, but failed unequivocally.

<sup>3</sup> The North Atlantic Council defines such moves of China as “system challenges” to the world order and pledged an aggressive engagement to the threat in the “Brussels Summit Communiqué” issued by the Heads of State and Government Meeting in Brussels (14 June 2021): 20.

<sup>4</sup> It is a kind of “intellectual imperialism.”

analysis of China. Nonetheless, his response relocated the basis of understanding of the national identity of China from the Western model of modernity to the structural stability of the organism called China (or Chinese civilization), which cannot but be defined as “remarkable inertia.”

China's national identity, as well as China itself, has so far been analyzed on the basis of Western standards, theories, and concepts. This led to the fallacy of explaining China's national identity by concentrating on the aspects that did emanate from Western experiences and standards while excluding all other Chinese characteristics inconsistent with them. In order to minimize such mistakes, it is necessary to focus on distinctive Chinese characteristics (such as the “remarkable inertia” mentioned by Fairbank), namely, Chinese ways of thinking, phenomena, organizations, institutions, systems, and social practices that clearly exist although they may be difficult to understand in Western terms. In other words, research on China's national identity must presuppose that Chinese civilization, formed through its long history and often referred to as a tradition, profoundly influences the formation of the present-day Chinese national identity.

From a historical perspective, how to understand the national identity of China lies in how to balance the continuity and discontinuity of Chinese civilization to the present (hereinafter, the word “tradition” will be used interchangeably with Chinese civilization). Even today, the experiences of the over-2000-year-long imperial rule have taken a major part in the making of the universal ideology and values (the essence of which is “Sinocentrism”) of Chinese civilization. In this respect, present China must be viewed as just one phase in its long history. Therefore, this paper argues that the national identity of China should be explored with greater emphasis on the continuity rather than on the discontinuity of its tradition.

The mainstream research on China's national identity in both the United States and Korea puts more emphasis on the discontinuity between modern China and traditional China rather than on their continuity. At the dawn of the 20th century, China's imperial system, order, and “tradition” were dismantled. Since then, many theorists have tried to understand modern and contemporary China with a thematic accent on the revolutionary discontinuity and modern novelty rather than the integrated continuity with

its imperial past. However, it is doubtful that such an approach can give an insightful understanding of present and future China. This doubt also leads one to wonder how to comprehend the long perseverance of Chinese civilization and the resilience of the Chinese empire—the repetitive emergence of a unified empire—which this paper believes to be the starting point for rethinking the national identity of China.

The 20th century began with the demise of the Chinese Empire that had lasted over 2,000 years and the advent of the rise of the nation-state, viz. The Republic of China (RC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Did China transform from an empire to a nation-state? Another question arises here: Has this transition from an empire to a nation-state truly and irrevocably obliterated the empire of China? Previous research on China's national identity stressed the revolutionary discontinuity and worked hard to substantiate it. To different degrees, mainstream studies on China—including those on modernization, revolution history and modernity—all to different degrees, emphasized the revolutionary discontinuity and novelty of modern China.

Those studies have obvious limitations in that China must pursue the Western model and eliminate non-Western elements, or “barbaric” elements. Moreover, their discourses use Western theories and concepts to explore China and shape the future of China. Western theories and concepts are the models of thought generalized from the culture, values, and development processes of Western society, so their experiment of adopting Western models to explain and construct China is the result of preposterous reasoning. According to this reasoning, the Chinese empire must have been irrevocably dismantled.

Then, has the empire of China truly vanished? Modern China has undergone a century of turbulence and revolution with violent political upheavals as its empire collapsed. The series of events, such as the collapse of the Qing, the birth of the ROC and its eventual collapse and the establishment of the PRC, was the epitome of turbulence and revolution. However, a contradictory side to these periods is that China has not fundamentally changed. Its way of thinking, civil order, political culture, and state

system has not changed significantly, either.<sup>5</sup> Despite some monumental changes, the vast organism called China is still working as a whole. This situation may be interpreted as “inertia,” but it can also be viewed as the structural stability of the organism, i.e., China.

How can one then understand the gap between exceptionally rapid political fluctuations and the structural stability of China with its own mechanism? This is an important question that should not be ignored in the research regarding modern China's national identity. Although this paper does not delve much into this question, what should be emphasized is the fact that the turbulence and revolution in modern China was a political, economic, and societal transformation that has not brought any structural alteration or complete destruction to its own mechanism. Also, the notion that political upheavals would fundamentally transform Chinese society and economy or immediately change its socio-economic structure should be inappropriate for any research on the national identity of China. Characteristically, each of China's social, economic, and political ecosystems maintained its independence whereas a certain holistic system, encompassing the aforementioned systems, has a highly stable and organic structure. This dualistic orientation, where the ecosystems have collided with one another and united together through Chinese history, can be termed the “coexistence of contradictions.”

The state of the “coexistence of contradictions” is one of the main difficulties in understanding the national identity of modern China. Thus, an in-depth study of China's national identity needs to further clarify the dualism in which structural stability and turbulent changes coexist without a major contradiction to form “one entirety.” In particular, to approach this “coexistence of contradictions” more analytically, the analysis of the national identity of China must presuppose the idiosyncratic Chinese ways of thinking which not only assumes that different cultural systems from the past and present coexist but also assumes that the future cultural system

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<sup>5</sup> For a closer look into these issues, refer to Jeon In-gap, *Hyeondae Jongguk-ui Jegukmong* [Modern China's Imperial Dreams] (Hakgobang, 2016).

will be formed through collision and concurrence of the past and present cultural systems. This paper explores five historical topics to highlight the research on China's national identity: 1) the idiosyncratic Chinese ways of thinking: *huitong* (會通) and *tongsantong* (通三統); 2) China's unique theory of the state, or the *culture-state*; 3) the principle of Chinese imperial rule; the flexibility of the concentration and decentralization of power, or the tradition of centralism (county system and prefecture system) and decentralism (feudal system); 4) China's experiment of reconstructing the legacy of the Chinese Empire in the 20th century; and 5) the potential of new Chinese values as "tradition."

## The Chinese Ways of Thinking: *Huitong* and *Tongsantong*

*Huitong* (會通), a unique and typical Chinese idea, means to integrate or to gain something through a thorough understanding. It regards history and tradition not as objects to discard and deny but as ones to integrate and reform in the belief that the future is built not by severing the past and present but by connecting them. This way of thinking is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It has been a guiding philosophy for China to use the past as political and cultural resources to plan the future. The emphasis on "innovating from tradition," or the "innovative shift of tradition" is gaining popularity in China these days. The tradition, denied for over 100 years in the 20th century, has not been trounced but is reborn as the "new tradition," and it proves that *huitong* is deeply entrenched in Chinese culture.

Zhu Xi's (朱熹) proposition, "Restore and succeed the true learning from past saints, and build a peaceful world for the future [爲往聖而繼絕學, 爲萬世而開太平]," is an *exemplum virtutis* that no Chinese intellectuals or power elites could ever ignore. The core of this tenet dictates that continuing Chinese civilization is a calling that elite intellectuals must fulfill. It also contains the notion that the future of China must be cultivated in conjunction with its civilization in the past. This is called the tradition of restoration. This cultural tradition perceives the past, present, and future not as isolated timescales but as a multilayered and integrated whole, namely the

tradition of *huitong*. In the philosophy of *huitong*, “Sinocentrism,” or Chinese values in modern terms, is an indispensable foundation on which to build the present and future. At the same time, tradition or “Chinese values” are reconfigured into the new tradition and new “Chinese values” to meet the needs of the present and future.

*Tongsantong* (通三統), or Bridging Three Traditions, is a representative Chinese theory that systematically explains *huitong*. The key ideas of this theory established by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒) are as follows. The tradition of each of the three ancient Chinese kingdoms of Xia, Shang, and Zhou formed an independent cultural system. However, the tradition of the former kingdom was not replaced and obliterated but incorporated into the later ones. It means that the different cultural systems of the three dynasties are not incompatible or conflicting but harmoniously concurrent in one continuum.

Therefore, the current tradition, or the “new” cultural system, contains multiple layered traditions. The traditions of Xia, Shang and Zhou, although different from one another, were combined into a holistic culture in the Han. Dong Zhongshu argued that the Han was the era in which new political, social, economic, and cultural traditions stood on the basis of the three preceding traditions. Following this logic, if independent, the cultural systems of the past, present, and future are not contradictory without displacing one after another but coexistent in one integrative organism.

*Tongsantong* is a historical philosophy of the *Chunqiu Gongyang* School. It teaches that the substances of traditions must be preserved even if its forms may be replaced with new forms according to the changes of time and practical needs. In this theory, *Santong*, that is, the three traditions of Xia, Shang and Zhou, are essentially one unitary tradition, neither disparate nor contradictory, although they may appear that way in their forms. This is why “The heaven and the truth remain unchanged” [天不變 道不變]; that is, the Chinese universal values are immutable. Therefore, a cultural system is created through a process of inheriting and expanding its preceding cultural system although it takes a different form in a new era. All the cultural systems in the past, present, and future represent Chinese universal values that manifest in different forms in different eras while sharing fun-

damental substances together. Following this reasoning, it is only natural for China to uphold cultural and historical continuity.

It is not difficult to find the philosophy of *Huitong* in various recent discourses on Chinese civilization that attempt to create a new, 21st century Sino-centric universalism. A typical example of such discourse can be found in Gan Yang's notion of *Tongsantong*. He proposed *huitong* as a Chinese alternative to the Western way of thinking to explain both China and the world from a new perspective. He stated as follows at the Beijing Consensus Forum held at Tsinghua University on May 12, 2005:

“There must be a new understanding of China's success of the Reformation and its connection and continuity to Mao Zedong's era. It must also be recognized that modern China has been established on the foundation of traditional Chinese civilization formed throughout its entire history. Today, I would like to emphasize that the three traditions of Confucius, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping (i.e., Confucianism, Maoism, and Dengism) are all in the continuum of Chinese history and civilization and, to cite the Gongyang theory, should bring about a new generation of *Tongsantong*.”<sup>6</sup>

Dengism is a market-oriented, freedom-and-rights-pursuing tradition established after the Reform and Opening while Maoism is an equality-and-justice-seeking tradition formed after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Gan Yang claims that the equality tradition of Maoism exerts a strong influence on modern Chinese. Confucianism is a tradition that has shaped Chinese civilization for thousands of years and is often referred to as traditional Chinese culture or Confucian culture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gan Yang, “Xin shidai de tongsantong: Sanzhong chuantong de ronghui yu zhonghua wenming de fuxing” [The New Era's *Tongsantong* system: The revival of the Three-Lock System and Huazhong civilization], *Shucheng* 7 (Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 2005): 39.

<sup>7</sup> Gan Yang claims that traditional Chinese civilization itself is an important factor that resulted in the success of its economic reformation. He emphasizes that China has preserved its traditional civilization while many empires have relinquished their traditional civilizations as they turned into modern states. Refer to Gan Yang, “Xin shidai de tongsantong: Sanzhong chuantong de

Gan Yang's key argument is that the cultural systems of the past, present, and future must be understood to be continuous rather than in conflict with one another. Gan Yang sees that the periods of Mao's Revolution, Deng's Reformation, and the present do not conflict with traditional China but enrich and diversify Chinese history, each occupying one stage in the continuum of its long history. Thus, his claim leads us to the positive re-evaluation of Chinese tradition as the source of modern China's development. In addition, Mao Zedong's period is reinterpreted as an era that paved the way for China's rise to wealth and power. Gan Yang defined this philosophy as "new-generation *Tongsantong*" and emphasized that it would provide a new understanding of China and the world.

Gan Yang's re-interpretation of *Tongsantong* became a new tradition that absorbs the traditions of Confucius, Mao Zedong, and Deng Xiaoping altogether. These three traditions, according to Gan Yang, are the key elements of modern China's national identity and the PRC is an embodiment of those traditions. Hence, the ultimate goal of their fusion is the revival of Chinese civilization. This point is evident in his discussions on civilization. He argues for a new model of China, or "Civilization China" in juxtaposition of Chinese traditional civilization. According to Gan, China was not simply a state but a massive civilization, manifested in the form of a state, so the 20th century saw its transformation from a civilization-state to a nation-state, or from a world [literally, heaven and earth] to a state. In the 21st century, he maintains, China should take its "historical civilization" as the most valuable resource to design a modern state and re-establish a civilization-state while pursuing de-westernization beyond modernization experiences.<sup>8</sup> Here, the theoretical foundation of his "Civilization China" is

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ronghui" [The New Era's *Tongsantong* system: The fusion of three traditions], *Shucheng* 6 (Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 2005): 29 and Gan, "Xin shidai de tongantong: Sanzhong chuantiing de ronghui yu zhonghua wenming de fuxing" [Unifying the three traditions in the New Era: The integration of three traditions and the revival of Chinese civilization]: 37.

<sup>8</sup> Gan Yang, "Cong minzu-guojia zouxiang wenming-guojia" [From a nation-state to a civilization state], *Shucheng* 2 (Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 2004): 35-36 & 39-40.

Confucianism<sup>9</sup> and the philosophy of *Huitong* pervades his discourse on civilization.<sup>10</sup>

## The Chinese Theory of the State: Culture-State

China historically has had its own theory of the state, or Culture-State. It proposes the realization of a state ruled by virtue and by the unity of the world (i.e., China). These two propositions are to ensure the legitimacy of the dynasty or state power such that neglecting them will bring a fatal crisis to state power. It is no exaggeration to claim that fulfilling these propositions is a legitimate obligation and the essential function of state power.

The realization of rule by virtue—cultural universality—as a legitimate function of state power begins with the premise that ‘[N]ot only institutions and order but also the state (power) itself must be established based on universal values/culture and must be a means to realize them.’ In this theory, universal values, norms, order and institutions, as well as universal culture, the state, society and individuals constitute one whole organism. The most essential element in this organism is universal values/culture by means of which state power establishes a moral/cultural community, governs by virtue, and accomplishes cultural homogeneity. The Confucian system, more accurately, the Confucian system of ethics [禮教體制] is a state system that embodies this theory of the state. Therefore, if its universal values/culture is denied, the Confucian system will end up collapsing. Then, not only will the integration of the state and society fail, but the order of every institution, including social, economic and political ones, also cannot

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<sup>2</sup> For details on this issue, refer to Cho Keong-ran, *Hyeondai Jungguk Jisikin-ui Jido* [The Map of Modern Chinese Intellectuals] (Gulhangari, 2013): 96.

<sup>10</sup> This theory of Gan Yang exudes strong confidence that the future civilization of China and the world will come from the culture, learning, philosophy, and history of China. Many Chinese intellectuals today share the opinion that the present stage is the renaissance of Chinese culture. The dawn of the 21st century saw this intellectual atmosphere becoming a general phenomenon in China, which derives universal meanings through discovering China’s philosophical resources and Confucianism, and integrating it with the experience of pursuing modernization and reconstructing the whole. It is a direct example of the *Huitong* way of thinking.

be sustained.

The preservation of the unified world (China) is another essential function of a state, in addition to the realization of rule by virtue, or cultural universality inseparable from cultural hegemony. Then, what is the premise that ensures the realization of cultural universality and the perpetuity of Chinese culture? Cultural universality and the perpetuation of Chinese hegemony cannot be achieved in the midst of divisions and chaos that results from turbulent times. A stable reign is an indispensable premise for the realization of the two propositions. Thus, the essential mission and *raison d'être* for the state and elites are to create and maintain the vast unified empire called China, and the state and elites have a moral and real obligation to unify the world (China)—in modern terms, to realize “One China” and “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind”—to guarantee the delightful and stable lives of the people.<sup>11</sup>

During the reign of the Republic of China, the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) proposed totally different paths to nation-building. However, both of them presupposed that the essential role of the state is to accomplish the unification of the world (China). In the first half of the 20th century, it was an obligation to build one unified China, overcoming national divisions caused by warlords and the Chinese Civil War. The nation-state was a new governance system to preserve “One China.” Both the KMT and CCP proposed a party-ruled state system, in which a political party is the main agent of nation-building. During that time, both the KMT and the CCP were aggregations of elites. In the KMT, a visionary pioneer and his elite followers led nation-building, and the CCP was also a vanguard party comprised of elites. Therefore, the political parties proposed by the KMT and the CCP were the main agents to rule the country either by a visionary pioneer or the collective will of vanguard elites. As the agent to rule the county, it was also a natural obligation for

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<sup>11</sup> During the Taiping Rebellion, the gentry class [紳士層], including Zeng Guofan [曾國藩] and Li Hongzhang [李鴻章], held the view that the sacrifices of individuals are inevitable for the stability and preservation of the world (China). This is another example of expressing the preservation of the unified world (China).

the political party to exert strong leadership and create conditions able to fulfill a unified world (China).<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, these Chinese elites attempted to turn Imperial China into a nation-state without resolving China's own traditional theory of the state. Their attempt at transformation, therefore, has failed to supply a new understanding of the functions of the state. The essential role of the state was still believed to rule by virtue (i.e., cultural universality) and the preservation of the unified world (China). In this regard, the process of China's nation-state building in the 20th century can be interpreted as a Chinese way of adapting to the modern world. China seeks for cultural universality by establishing a moral state—an ideology state in modern terms—, fulfills the essential function of the state for one unified China, and uses a modern governance system in the form of a nation-state. As a result, China's ultimate goal for a nation-state and the Chinese concept of a nation-state inevitably differed from those of Western states.<sup>13</sup>

China is said to be a civilization rather than a country. In the late 19th century, as the Chinese imperial system began its downhill slide, its civilization tumbled from a universal civilization to merely one of several civilizations, even a backward one. China's universal imperial culture ("Sino-centrism") has also devolved into a China-only traditional culture. The diffusion of this new common sense means that Chinese universalism has lost its influence. Over the past 20 years, Chinese scholars have proposed and debated various state theories regarding the questions of what kind of country China is and what kind of state it should build. From their active discussions, the return of Chinese universalism can be observed. Outstand-

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<sup>12</sup> Another issue to pay attention to here is that there was an undercurrent demand for strong leadership in society. The political conservatism, repeatedly surfaced in modern Chinese history, reflects Chinese society's demand for strong leadership and thus should be understood as a fundamentally identical school of thought.

<sup>13</sup> A fact to notice here is that cultural universality—universalism, the core value of the traditional state theory—is the essential asset to uphold an empire. The immense realm of an empire encompasses numerous differences and diversities, and universalism is an indispensable principle to embrace them. The universal values that a hegemonic empire transmits are a crucial resource to unify its realm. Therefore, an empire gives full measure to create and promulgate its universal values.

ing examples are the theories of civilization-state proposed by neo-Confucianists,<sup>14</sup> neo-leftists, and neo-liberals, and the state theory of neo-authoritarians (neo-conservatives),<sup>15</sup> in addition to the theory of the civilizational state (文明型國家論).

Although these theories of civilization-state differ in their specific visions, they share the following ideas. All of them start from the perspective of civilization history which holds that Western state theories cannot thoroughly explain Chinese thought on the nature and functions of a state. In addition, these civilization theories extensively probed the matter of how to reconfigure “Chinese models,” “Chinese problems,” and “Chinese ways” into “universal models,” “universal problems,” and “universal ways.”<sup>16</sup> Particularly noteworthy in these discussions is that their main topic was how to identify the foundation of China’s civilization. In China, this issue

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<sup>14</sup> Yao Zhongqiu, *Shijie Lishi de Zhongguo Shike* [China’s Moment in World History] (Hainan Chubanshe, 2019); Yao Zhongqiu, *Rujia Xianzheng Zhuyi Chuantong* [Confucian Constitutionalism Tradition] (Zhongguo Fazheng Daxue Chubanshe, 2013); Chen Lai, *Chuantong yu Xiandai: Renwen Zhuyi de Shijie* [Tradition and Modernity: The Vision of Humanism] (Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2006); Chen Ming, “Yuandao yu zhongguo wenhua baoshou zhuyi-zai sichuan daxue lunli xue yanjiu zhongxin de zuotan” [The Yuan Dao and Chinese cultural conservatism: A discussion at the Ethics Research Center of Sichuan University], *Zhongguo Ruxue Wang* (www.Confuchinan.Com) (May 2004); Jiang Qing, *Zhengzhi Ruxue: Dangdai Ruxue de Zhuanxiang, Tezhi yu Fazhan* [Political Confucianism: The Turn, Characteristics and Development of Contemporary Confucianism] (Sanlian Shudian, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Xiao Gongqin, *Chaoyue Zuoyou Jijin Zhuyi: Zouchu Zhongguo Zhuanxiang de Kunjing* [Beyond Left and Right Radicalism: Out of the Dilemma of China’s Transformation] (Zhejiang Daxue Chubanshe: 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Looking at the CCP’s recent national development strategies, such as the community of common human destiny theory and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the idiom *Chinese characteristics* seems to be a “temporary expression of self” amid the pursuit of universalism (Chen Yun, “Tianxia sixiang yu xiandai xing de zhongguo zhi lu: Zhongguo wenti, zhongguo sixiang, zhongguo daolu lun gang” [The idea of Tianxia and the Chinese way to modernity: Chinese issues, thought, and ways], *Sixiang yu Wenhua* [Thought and Culture] 8 (2008): 35). Chinese-style development strategies, implicated in terms such as Chinese way, Chinese methods, or Chinese model, which all emphasize Chinese characteristics, do not mean the unique Chinese way, development model, or problems, but the final destination of providing the universal way, universal norms, and universal order to “China in China,” “China in Asia,” and “China in the world.”

is referred to as “establishing a civilization-state (文明立國).”<sup>17</sup> It is the product of the thought that civilization is an indispensable element of nation-building. Furthermore, this thought follows China’s traditional state theory that equates civilization with a state (polity).

Taking the liberalist theory of civilization-state as an example, we can look into similarities between China’s traditional state theory and its recent civilization-state theory. The civilization-state sought by Chinese liberalists is a constitutional state. Their definition of the constitutional state is as follows: “The constitutional government (i.e., state or polity) creates (constitutional) civilization.”<sup>18</sup> Civilization also provides the state with norms. From the perspective of civilization history, a state with a deep and thick civilization root can form a constitutional state.” As can be seen from the statement that “state and civilization are one but two, two but one,” their ideal state is one in which the civilization and the polity are integrated into one.<sup>19</sup> Chinese liberalists also regard “establishing a state of civilization” and “establishing a state of freedom” as an identical matter, as stated in the following statement; the civilization capacity, provided by a constitutional polity under the democratic legislation, will honor the ‘political state’ with a crown called civilization. Consequently, the state that they seek to build is both a state and a civilization alike and its people naturally come to share the same cultural identity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Establishing a state of civilization means “reviving the culture.” The controversy over this issue has been the unchanged core philosophical problem in the field of philosophy since the end of Qing.

<sup>18</sup> Neo-Confucianism, Neo-leftists, and liberalists differ in their opinions on whether a polity (a constitutional government for liberalists) produces a civilization or whether a civilization creates a polity. The former two believe the latter while the liberalists believe that a constitutional government (polity) is the foundation of civilization.

<sup>19</sup> This relationship seen in the liberalist theory of the civilization state is also observed in Neo-Confucianist and neo-leftist theories. Their theories differ in their views on the content and substance of civilization. See “Zhongguo shike de sixiang chuang fa” [The ideological creation of Chinese era]

<sup>20</sup> Here is the reason why liberalists emphasize the establishment of a state of civilization. Building a civilization state belongs to the establishment of historical civilization and it is to explore modern Chinese’ return to their origins and loyalty to their culture. The aforementioned interpretation of civilization nourishes the regime’s survival, masters the heart with politics, and

Then, why are various civilization-state theories being raised recently in China? It is not irrelevant to China's national strategy for a global hegemony. Universalism is an essential public item for the imperial nation-state of China in competing with the US for political and cultural hegemony. To be an unshakable global leader, it is necessary for China to offer and disseminate universal values to the world. The problem is, however, what kind of universalism it can offer. Liberalism, the New Left, neo-authoritarianism, and neo-Confucianism diverge in regard to this point.<sup>21</sup> The universalisms proposed by these stances all have their roots in China's traditional world views and thoughts. Historically, China has maintained a universalism tradition. The arguments of those diverse civilization-state theories begin with the affirmation that the present is the time to discover China's universal traditions and revive its civilization. In other words, China has historically and continuously expanded its Sinocentric cultural boundaries through cultural diversity and assimilation, thereby representing globalism on their terms.

This regime of thought vividly captures China's perception and doctrine of the world in the sense of redefining the world as a structure that expresses humanitarian and globalism. The intellectual trend also emphasizes the unity of individuality, sociality, and universality altogether.<sup>22</sup> Besides, China's universalism aims to complete the world not by denying the beauty of every individual, family, clan, community, and state but by pursuing the coexistence of all those components.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese scholars in PRC do seem to share the belief that their country needs a new universalist narrative.

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realizes the unity of heaven's ways and human minds. Thus, the ultimate aim is to facilitate the modern order created by the dual revolution of cultural China, a nation-state, and political China, a democratic state. This is the fundamental issue of the 100 years of future transformation and the present aim. Therefore, the theories of polity and civilization must be fundamentally integrated into one (Ibid.: 6).

<sup>21</sup> The question of what types of universalism, civilization, and world order each stance pursues is beyond the scope of this paper and deserves a separate comprehensive analysis.

<sup>22</sup> "Zhongguo shike de sixiang chuang fa": 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## Flexibility Between Centralization and Decentralization

The harmony and conflict between centralization and decentralization is historically one of the key issues for understanding the national identity of China. China has experienced numerous divisions and unifications throughout its history, characteristic of Chinese history. This reflects a decentralization tendency due to China's vast territory and underlying social and regional pluralism. Chronic issues rooted in regional and cultural diversity, such as the conflict between the central and provincial governments and the tension between the state and the private domain, would reinforce the decentralizing trend and incur nationwide turmoil at times. Nonetheless, the conviction that "[I]f the world has stayed unified for a long time, it will definitely divide; if it has stayed divided for long, then it will definitely unify" has been widely shared in Chinese history. Since the Sui and Tang, this conviction has been accepted like an axiom.

Does this conviction have any historical substance? All Chinese dynasties have had a sense that they must succeed in the realm of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's unified empire at least. This is a proposition related closely to the legitimacy of the regime. Many dynasties successfully secured their legitimacy by incorporating and governing the so-called China proper, or the territory that the Qin had unified and ruled for the first time in Chinese history. Here, central governance has two meanings. First, it refers to the regime's (i.e., the emperor/central power) direct governance of the people. China had historically considered this direct governance of people as an ideal governing system. Second, it means rule by virtue or universal values, which realizes a cultural community based on Confucian values and ethical culture. Also, the unification of the world (China) had been the primary objective of central governance. Not only the ethnic Han-Chinese dynasties, such as the Han, the Sui, the Tang, the Song and the Ming, but the conquest dynasties such as the Yuan and the Qing also followed this "historical inertia" without exceptions and accomplished the mission of unifying "the world" (China) for their own dynastic legitimacy.

The Chinese empire had the capacity to unite its vast territory and

manage its diverse private domain. The private domain covers various institutions, including family, clan, village community, gentry group, religious association, guild organization (guild, public office, and hall), regional association, secret association, and ranger fighter group. These private institutions included not only official groups such as clans, villages, gentry groups, guilds and local associations, but also unofficial organizations such as secret associations or ranger fighter groups as found in *The JiangHu Record of Another World*.<sup>24</sup> The former belongs to the official private domain while the latter to the unofficial one.

Notable unofficial regional groups exerted a powerful influence in local society albeit exerting only unofficial power. They include secret organizations, such as the Tiandihui (天地會), Gelaohui (哥老會), and the late Qing era's Qing Bang (青幫) and Hong Bang (紅幫), and secret religious sects, such as the White Lotus (白蓮教), the Boxers (義和團), Tianli-Jiao (天理教), and Luo-Jiao (羅教). These private powers exhibited various degrees of influence in their regions, sometimes, to the point of competing or potentially competing with the state's power depending on the location and time or the degree of state control in the region.

Private organizations wielded undeniable official or unofficial power in local or private society. State power could not control the local or private domain, nor ignore their power or interests. For instance, village communities and guilds collected taxes on behalf of the state (the consignment of administrative work to private institutions). These groups also mediated disputes and conflicts within the community and exercised the right to punish when necessary.

Meanwhile, it is not unreasonable to say that spatial pluralism can be translated into regional disparities inseparable from social disparities. Having a wide diversity, in fact, means having as much disparity, so subsys-

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<sup>24</sup> According to Mio Kishimoto, these groups, whether official or not, were communities with a strong bond and closed to others in the Ming and Qing periods. In addition, these groups exerted a strong influence on keeping order (and causing disorder) in the regional society and on the political trends of regional society throughout all Chinese dynasties. See "Ming-Qing-jidaino haishin" [Local gentry in the Ming and Qing dynasties] in *Keni-to Kenryoku* [Authority and Power] (Iwanami Shoten, 1990): 53.

tems with large disparities can work as a centrifugal force to pull the empire apart. Clashes between subsystems or even conflicting interests between the state and the private domain, between the central and provincial governments, and between regional governments could degenerate into political feuds. For example, deep-seated localism and local elites' pursuit of decentralization, as well as regional factionalism accompanied by violent power struggles, suggest that political divides were not just a probability but a reality.

Although it was highly probable for regional and social diversities to cause divisions, the tendency toward integration was strong as well. This is proven by the repetition of division and unification throughout Chinese history. It has been a historical pattern that the weakening of central power immediately led to the strengthening of decentralization and the expansion of local autonomy. Eventually, completed and preserved by a central power, the centralized political system was the key requirement for integration. In order to maintain the vast empire of China, it was more important than anything else for the central government to achieve the integration of the state by effectively controlling the interests and autonomy of the regional and private domains. In order to maintain One China, it was essential to coordinate the interests between the central and provincial regions and between the state and the private domain.

How did Qing China unify the numerous disparities within and keep the stable imperial system? The Qing encompassed the Sinocentric Confucian world, the Xinjiang Islamic world, the Tibetan Buddhist world, and its sacred homeland of Manchuria, by and large. The Sinocentric world is "China Proper (or Inner China)" whereas the rest were "Outer China." The Qin observed traditional Chinese ways in "China proper." All Chinese dynasties have needed to settle the matter of balancing centralization and decentralization since the Qin and the Han. Thus, China has accumulated abundant rationale and experiences on this matter throughout its history.

A representative example is the debate over feudalism (decentralization) and the prefecture-county theory (centralization). The conflict between these two systems has long been a matter of controversy since the Qin. The prefecture-county theory advocates that the emperor (central

power) take a strong grip on regional and private sectors through the centralized bureaucracy and promote a unified world (China). Feudalism, on the other hand, argues that the separation of power or decentralization is the main requirement to achieve political and social stability and the path to avoid conflict and war caused by the privatization of the state (the biggest problem of the prefecture-county system).

The prefecture-county system historically appears to be a strong system of centralized governance, but a more thorough investigation reveals that a typical Chinese-style governance system maintains the unification of the realm through balancing centralization and decentralization. The traditional Chinese centralized system of governance differs in its character from a modern centralized system. In the traditional system, the imperial authority did not have absolute power over the military, the finance, the judiciary, and the educational institutions of the state. Instead, considerable power over those institutions was delegated to local elites and provincial governors, who were like “small emperors” of their own regions, while the imperial authority indirectly ruled or controlled the interests of regional and private domains for balance. The legitimacy of the emperor was vested by the provinces’ (local interests) agreement on his rule. In other words, China’s long successful central rule has great bearing on the fact that imperial power sought to balance and harmonize central and regional interests.

The Qing also maintained its power through the cooperation of unofficial groups and local gentries that exerted great de facto influence on the private sphere. In this regard, the centralized rule of traditional empires, including the Qing, could be maintained by way of compromising with regional and private spheres. Therefore, China’s centralized bureaucracy must be understood differently from the modern counterpart linked tightly to the nation-state. In reality, policy decisions were rarely made by one-sided orders from the central government or central bureaucrats. Clans, public offices (公局, the consensus council of local elites), guilds, village communities, or unofficial private groups were involved in policy-making along with the central government which witnessed a great process of conflict and compromise over the distribution of interests. The empire ruled the world (China) while contending or cooperating with these powers that rep-

resented regional or private interests. In other words, without the consensus of private and/or regional representatives, the empire's rule could not maintain stability.

## The Legacy and Reconstruction of the Empire

Before the modern era, there was a “world order centered on China.” It is called the “Sinocentric order” and the embodiment of this order was the Chinese Empire. The Chinese Empire can be divided into the early and later Chinese empires based on the Tang-Song transition period. The typical cases of early Chinese empires are the Han and the Tang while the Ming and the Qing are later empires. These dynasties are called empires by modern scholars not merely because they were ruled by an emperor.

An empire here refers to the form of a state or governance system. China and Europe have different historical genealogies of governance systems. In general, Europe began with the empire (e.g., Roman Empire), followed by feudal states, absolutist states, and then nation-states. China has followed a totally different course of development in experiencing different state types. It can be said that China has transformed from an empire into a modern nation-state without going through the stages of feudalism and absolutism although this claim might be disputed.

An empire is a form of ruling system that precedes the current system, viz. the nation-state. An empire reigns over a vast territory, controls systematically its entire geographical and societal sphere, and encompasses diverse languages, religions, and cultures. Moreover, an empire must have hegemony over civilization to offer values and culture that the world can share. An empire should be able to integrate its vast realm into one political unit by appropriately coordinating internal bureaucracy and indirect rule; the representative example of the latter is the *Jimi* Rule (Loose Rein Rule). Of course, overwhelming military prowess, economic power, and strong tax control are the most important elements in maintaining the empire.

China's imperial system, formed by the Qin and the Han, satisfies the aforementioned requirements of an empire. Despite considerable changes, the imperial system basically continued until the early 20th century. The

Chinese imperial system was supported by the notion of Great Unification in which the territory, ideology, culture, economy, and society of the empire are all unified into one. The Qing as the last dynasty before the 20th century completed this Great Unification and declared itself to be the ruler of the world, claiming itself *Tianchao* (天朝), or the Heavenly Dynasty.

As *Tianchao*, the Qing ideologically assumed the whole world as its realm to rule and all the people of the world as its subjects to rule. However, neither the entire world nor all the peoples on earth can be under its reign. Therefore, there emerged ideological and realistic forms of the empire. The ideological form of the empire comprises a three-dimensional structure: “China Proper (or Sinocentric China)” — the realm of the Han (漢) Chinese —, “Outer China” — the realm of the nomads —, and tributary states. According to whether or not the reigning territory was unified as one single political unit, the real realm of the empire could not but be limited to “China Proper” or “Outer China.” Thus, in reality, the realm of the Qing had a two-tiered structure of “China Proper” and “Outer China.”

The *Huayi* theory justifies the ideological form of the Chinese empire through the Chinese way of understanding the world. This theory divides the world into the world of *hua* (華 civilization) and the world of *yi* (夷 barbarism). The former is the center of the world (i.e., China), where universal values are observed, while the latter is part of the world other than China (*huawai* 化外) in which universal values have not been realized. Here, the universal values are Chinese values that must be shared by the *hua* world as well as the *huawai* world. The *Huayi* theory provides a logic whereby the Chinese people perceive China as a world and Chinese civilization as a universal civilization.

The ideological form of the empire is designed by the logic of the *Huayi* theory. Ideologically, the land and people of the world must be under the unitary reign of the Chinese emperor, and the world must be the realm of the Chinese empire. In actuality, however, it is impossible for the empire to rule the entire world so the real realm cannot but be limited to a certain extent. Thus, the ideological form of the empire is modified in the *Huayi* theory as a three-dimensional realm. The realm under the unitary reign of the emperor is divided into the *hua* world and the *yi* world; the for-

mer means the Sinocentric China, or China Proper while the latter the non-Sinocentric world, or Outer China. The non-Sinocentric world, in turn, is divided into “Non-Sinocentric China” and tributary states depending on their geographical, cultural, and political distance from Sinocentric China. Historically, however, a tributary state that had belonged to the Non-Sinocentric China was sometimes incorporated into “Sinocentric China,” and vice versa. Thus, the division of “Sinocentric China,” “Non-Sinocentric China,” and tributary states were historically not fixed but changeable.

As a result of the Opium War, the Chinese empire faced serious challenges to its system and order. The breakup of the traditional universal empire became an irreversible trend of the time. The challenges that the Chinese empire faced can be summarized in the following three phenomena. First, the Chinese empire lost its universal empire status as its ideological empire structure. Second, in line with the decline of the Qing’s control over its empire, the decentralization of China Proper accelerated, thereby segmenting China into “multiple polities.” Third, the *fanbu* (藩部), or fiefdoms, were visibly departing from the empire, where they occupied one axis of the imperial structure. These factors created complicated functional relationships and plunged the empire to its demise. It is at this juncture that the nation-state system, given as a universal form of a state, has emerged as an alternative governance system over the imperial system. Establishing a nation-state turned out to be a historical mission in modern Chinese history.

Many proposals have been made for the establishment of a nation-state since 1895 when the ideological form of the imperial system was confirmed to have collapsed. Diverse governance systems, such as constitutional monarchy, enlightened monarchy and republicanism, competed with one another from the last days of the Qing to the early days of the ROC, but China settled on republicanism after the 1911 Revolution and the birth of the ROC. Later, both the KMT and the CCP based their political system on republicanism but collided as they chose capitalist and non-capitalist paths, respectively. These two conflicting paths to a nation-state spiraled into a lengthy civil war, which ended with the non-capitalist side’s victory in 1949. However, the experiment of a non-capitalist nation-state

lasted only between 1949 and 1954, and China shifted its path to building a socialist state that concluded the quest for the type of nation-state in the 20th century.

While evaluating China's overall journey of nation-building to a socialist state, can anyone assert with confidence that the Qing's ideological and imperial structures have collapsed as well? This question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no but this paper attempts to point out the importance of the following question. Does this historical understanding have any historical substance as it emphasizes the historical discontinuity between the empire and the nation-state and, thus, perceives the PRC as a completely new China?

The collapse of the Qing is a historical fact. However, its collapse does not necessarily mean the collapse of the imperial structure composed of "Sinocentric China" and "Non-Sinocentric China." It requires highly elaborate and intricate discussions to demonstrate the imperial legacy which has been inherited to date. Nonetheless, at least some attention should be paid to the obvious reality that the legacy of the traditional empire has been transmitted to present-day China and is being reconstructed. A notable example is the realm of the empire, which has been reconstructed into the realm of the PRC as a nation-state.

The value of Chinese culture in the history of its civilization and the realm of previous dynasties are the legacies that any Chinese dynasty or ruler must inherit without exception. In particular, overcoming the divided state and unifying the realm—primarily, unifying the territory—has been the key requirement for the legitimacy of any Chinese regime. The PRC has successfully inherited the empire's territory. "Outer China/Non-Sinocentric China" under the Qing is still part of China. This structure of modern China is the result of inheriting and reconstructing the structural legacy of the empire. Thus, the PRC has been able to secure historical legitimacy as one era in the long history of China.

## **Chinese Values as Assets for the Future**

The 20th century was the era of denying Chinese culture. The PRC's desire

to create a new strong China culminated in the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a tremendous cultural experiment that attempted to replace China's traditional universal values with alternative universal values such as Marx-Leninism and Maoism. It was an experiment that completely denied the Chinese culture rooted in Confucian universal values. Borrowing Li Zehou's (李泽厚) words, Confucianism is the Chinese identity itself, entrenched in Chinese culture as a "cultural-psychological formation," but the Cultural Revolution tried to create a national identity that dispensed with Confucian tradition. Mao's experiment of creating new "Chinese-ness," or new Chinese-style universal values, to build a strong nation, however, could not overcome the weight of Chinese culture.

At the turn of the 20th to 21st century, The PRC's attitude toward Chinese culture shifted from denial to acceptance. The intellectuals do not hesitate to claim that present China is on the verge of a new renaissance era. Leaving behind the 20th century's experiment of denying "Chinese values" to build a strong nation, the PRC is now unfolding the reversed intellectual paradigm wherein Chinese values are the main assets to design a future the PRC. The rise of the PRC as a new powerhouse has made this reversal possible. That is, the realization of a strong China has helped it regain its confidence in Chinese culture.

The PRC's confidence in its culture became more pronounced with the global financial crisis and the Beijing Olympics in 2008. With the start of the 21st century, the PRC intellectual society delved deeply into the "civilization discourse." After the success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the overcoming of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the intellectual society has become more devoted to the civilization discourse and became familiar with concepts such as "universal value," "universal culture," "Chinese model," "Chinese standards," and "Beijing Consensus." the PRC's economic and political influence as a "new powerhouse" has already been expanding to the global level. China's rapidly popular civilization discourse represents its struggles for civilizational hegemony beyond economic and political hegemony.

I have divided China's nation-building process from the early mod-

ern to the Reform and Opening periods into five phases.<sup>25</sup> Each phase had to deal with fierce cultural debates over the direction of nation-building.<sup>26</sup> Those cultural debates shared the following points. First, the standards of thought and practice were from the West. Modernity<sup>27</sup> was considered truth itself and the core concept to interpret China and the world. Various cultural debates presupposed the adoption of modernity and focused on the question of how to build culture.

Second, building a strong nation was a common goal of these cultural debates. The PRC's cultural debates concern the issue of how to integrate traditions and modernity and rebuild nation and culture. It can be said that the endeavors to develop an overall strategy for nation-building manifested in cultural debates. About ten years ago, I analyzed what role the Chinese traditions represented by Confucianism have played in nation-state building and made the following points: "A nation-state per se, which the PRC tries to build sometimes by destroying Confucianism and other times by utilizing it, might not be the end goal but a means to restore the vast unified world (China) via cultural universalism. The Chinese people have a deep-rooted notion that the essential function of a state is to unify the entire realm and conserve it forever. A nation-state is simply a modern form to accomplish this mission."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The first phase was until 1911, when China was preparing for nation building. The second phase was the stage of forming the agent of nation building from 1912 to 1927, from the establishment of the ROC to the establishment of the Nanking nationalist government. In the third phase, from the emergence of the Nanking nationalist government in 1928 to the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sino-Japanese War in 1937, China experimented with building a capitalist nation. The fourth phase was the period from the 1937 Sino-Japanese War to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, then to the establishment of the constitution in 1954, when capitalist and non-capitalist national builders were in conflict/clashing. The fifth phase was the period of building a socialist nation from the enactment of the constitution in 1954 to just before the adoption of the reform and opening policy (1978-1982).

<sup>26</sup> This issue was discussed in more detail in Jeon In-Gap, "Cultural conservatism as an adaptation strategy" <https://scienceon.kisti.re.kr/srch/selectPORSrchArticle.do?cn=NART69914378>.

<sup>27</sup> "Modernity" in this paper refers to the properties of both early and late modern eras. The early modern era refers to the first half of the 20th century and the late modern era refers to the period since the 1990s.

<sup>28</sup> Jeon In-Gap, "Chongron: Gongja, takgojeon mirae gihoek" [Overview: Confucius, the pretext of

The modern Chinese collective consciousness sought to find truth from the “truth” of the West, to build a strong nation with wealth and a powerful military, and to complete the establishment of a nation-state. This attitude reignited the debate over cultural powers in the 1980s. This debate was the resurgence of the spirit of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement. Up to this point, the PRC’s intellectual paradigm was simply a continuation of the paradigm predominant in the 100 years of the early modern era. That was interpreting China and the world with the concepts represented by “Europeanization,” adopting the Western ways of thinking and concepts. The philosophical space of this paradigm was bound to be too narrow to employ a different philosophical experiment, namely “adopting the West’s scholarly knowledge and reconstructing a new civilization with China’s own independent identity.”<sup>29</sup>

As the rise of the PRC became evident with successful reform and opening, however, the intellectual paradigm also underwent a radical shift. The overarching trend of change was the “re-universalization of Chinese values” beyond the “modernistic reconstruction of traditions” and the “Chinese-style reconfiguration of modernity.” The humanism debate in Chinese studies developed with increasing enthusiasm in the 1990s, which opened the door for this change. Chinese humanism advocates tried to establish a new tradition of truth through the trinity of 1) freedom and rights, 2) equality and justice, and 3) Confucian universalism. Although the debate has not discovered and provided any substantial content sufficient to the new tradition of truth, it has made an important contribution to the spread of an idea throughout Chinese society. What matters is the necessity of critically examining the modernity-centered intellectual paradigm and designing a China-centered intellectual paradigm. Another important contribution of the debate is the revitalization of traditional Chinese cultural-

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 future planning] in *Gongja: Hyeondae Jungguk-ul Garojireuda* [Confucius penetrating modern China] (Saemulgyeol, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Yeon Jae-heum, “Jungguk daeryuk-ui ‘dangdae munhwa bosujuui-e daehan yeongu” [A study on cultural conservatism in contemporary China], *Jungukhakbo* [Journal of Chinese Studies] 60 (2009): 443.

ism/universalism in contemporary cultural discourses.

What is interesting is the outcome of the postmodernism debate in China. Since postmodernism is the main theoretical tool for the deconstruction of modernity, this debate ends up with the demand for pursuing China's own modernity and Chinese-ness (Sinocentrism) as a new intellectual paradigm. This outcome exhibits a typical Chinese-style appropriation of postmodernism but through this debate, a new social consensus was formed: China must reweigh the Western intellectual paradigm and reconstruct China's own intellectual paradigm. The new consensus interconnects with the belief that Chinese cultural values and concepts must be useful for the future of the PRC and the world and for securing the hegemony of present and future discourses. This is also relevant to almost all modern Chinese schools of thought, such as neo-Confucianism, liberalism, neo-leftism, cultural conservatism and incorporate Confucianism, in their search for new models of thinking and discourse.

This overall situation provided intellectual nourishment and space for the formation of a new intellectual paradigm. It also brought another change in the late 2000s. From this period on, three new phenomena have arisen. First, the Chinese elites have begun to reconceptualize civilization and the world within their own framework originating from China's history and traditions. Second, China's own *huitong* philosophy is being restored. Third, the culture-state theory, weaving civilization and politics together in harmony of unity, has reemerged. These three phenomena dominate China's civilization discourses, which seek to advance China from a wealthy and strong nation to a civilized state. They also indicate that the intellectual community has evolved into a stage of discussing the universal values and order of mankind and the key mission of such discussions becomes the "re-universalization of Chinese values."

Therefore, it can be said that the PRC's modern intellectual paradigm began with a "cultural reconstruction" in the form of an "adaptation discourse" and concluded with a civilization discourse whose ultimate goal was the "re-universalization of Chinese values." In the forty years following the Reform and Opening, the PRC saw the Culture Fever in the 1980s, which idolized and reaffirmed modernity, the call for traditional cultural-

ism in the 1990s, and then the rapid rise of cultural conservatism as the mainstream discourse after experiencing the critical reexamination of modernity. In this philosophical and cultural atmosphere, the Chinese way of thinking has included civilization discourses that emphasize Chinese-ness and Mainland-ness.

Recent discourses on civilization engage in the topic of the civilization-state. Various forms of civilization-states have been suggested and described, including the neo-leftist civilization-state, the neo-Confucian civilization-state, the liberalist civilization-state, the neo-authoritarian state, and the civilizational state. An investigation of the logic of these state theories reveals that they have all inherited the culture-state tradition that had combined civilization and state together. All these state theories have their logic deeply rooted in the traditional culture-state ideology, which unifies the civilization and the state. Each school of thought, based on this civilization-state ideology, presented a new configuration of order, that is, a new imperial order that re-invokes the traditional Chinese tributary order, world order, world system, and worldview, all of which are to function as general strategies to “revive the great Chinese nation.” The domination (hegemony) and royal way (generosity) are in the process of unification. This is Sun Yatsen’s and Mao Zedong’s dream, as well as Xi Jinping’s “China Dream.”

The reintroduction of the *tianxia* ideology (天下主義), or “all-under-heaven-ism,” at this point symbolically suggests the impatience of the PRC. What dramatically shows the impatience is, in particular, the trend of its power elites to draw upon the *tianxia* ideology to present new world order and view. However, the fact is that today’s China is steadily developing its internal strength with the help of its gigantic economic power. Also, it is evident that the PRC is taking the challenge of building a new empire with Chinese culture, tradition, and history as assets while inheriting its imperial legacies. This challenge, I contend, displays an attempt to bring Chinese civilization back in lieu of Western civilization, reestablish the position of the standard universal civilization on their terms, and create a new universalism under “Chinese values.”

## Closing Words

China's uniqueness and historical experiences are bound to conflict with modernity from the West. The Western standards, inevitably adopted during the conflict, have become rooted in Chinese society. At the same time, Chinese standards have been reconfigured to meet the needs of the new era. Despite the clash with Chinese standards starting from the late 19th century, Western standards had an overwhelming influence during the period of radical changes, such as the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement (the Neo-cultural Movement) and the Cultural Revolution, and have provided China with a future path and model.

Then, have Chinese standards gone extinct? It never did. Instead of extinction, they have been invigorated via reconstruction. In today's China, we can find the continuity of the past. In order to examine such continuity, this paper quests the PRC's own ways of thinking, state theories, and imperial experiences (of balancing centralization and decentralization, in particular) that still continue to influence modern China. Along this line, I also examine how the PRC would inherit the legacy of Imperial China—territory (One China)—and that of Chinese values—Sinocentrism—with a view to utilizing Chinese values as a competent and even hegemonic asset for China in the 21st century.

China's national identity today will be unveiled more evidently through the *huitong* in premodern times, or integration/unification, the revolutions in the first half of the 20th century, the establishment of a socialist market economy in the late 20th century, and Chinese standards (history) accumulated gradually throughout its long history. In order to illustrate China's national identity, it is particularly necessary to understand China's idiosyncratic nature of a structurally stable ecosystem that embraces contradictory systems towards one whole (the wholeness of contradictory systems and the structural stability of the whole).

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