

To learn from the ancestors or to borrow from the foreigners: China's self-identity as a modern civilisation

Wang Mingming

Peking University, China; Xinjiang Normal University

Abstract

This article is a shortened version of a lecture. It deals with the duality of China's modern 'civilisation' – its connectivity with the 'ancestral landscape' and its openings to the outside world. In presenting the duality, the author examines a wide range of intellectual and political discourses of 'civilisation' emerged in the past three decades and relates them to the translation and re-translation of the concept in a longer history. The author argues that much of the 'dynamics of civilisation' come from the circulation of such ideas as 'civilisation' itself, and anthropologists can understand 'civilisation' better if they take ethnography of ideas more seriously.

Keywords

Ethnography of ideas, civilisation(s), self-awareness of culture, ecological civilisation, margins

It is my great honour to give this lecture to celebrate the launch of the Centre for Research into the Dynamics of Civilisation. It is also particularly significant for me because 20 years ago, when I returned to work in China after completing my doctorate here in London, I conducted some research on 'civilisation' and wrote a few comparative pieces on the relationship between Chinese and other civilisations. I can't confirm whether CREDOC's invitation to me is a sign of the significance of these pieces or not, but I want to sincerely thank you for this opportunity.

Lecture presented at launch of Centre for Research into the Dynamics of Civilisation, University College London, 13 February 2014. Translated by Harriet Evans.

Corresponding author:

Wang Mingming, Peking University, Haidian District, Beijing City, Beijing 100871, China.

Email: wangmingming2006@163.com

I initially thought to report briefly on recent relevant work I have done, but I have decided to change my 'story' and to talk about my experiences over the past twenty years in order to illustrate changes in Chinese anthropological reflections on notions of civilisation. The first 10 of those 20 years, 1994–2004, coincided with the last 10 years of the career of the celebrated sociologist and ethnologist, Professor Fei Xiaotong. During that decade I worked with him in Peking in the Research Centre of Sociology and Anthropology, and the Research Institute for Chinese Society and Development, both of which he founded. Professor Fei Xiaotong was born in the last year of the Qing dynasty, in 1910, and witnessed almost an entire century of tumultuous intellectual change, so as one of his assistants and, as it were, an 'insider', I was able to develop an understanding of the relationship between the shifts in his ideas and his times.

Over this 20-year period, I have also been influenced through exposure to a number of other eminent academics who, between the 1980s and the 1990s, became well known for their cutting-edge contributions across a number of cognate fields. By the eve of the millennium, some of these had become associated with the 'liberals', the 'New Left', or the 'neo-Confucianists'. I, in a manner of speaking, was conducting long-term fieldwork amongst them and through 'participant observation', came to realise that they were all engaged with the past, present and future of Chinese civilisation and its thought, writings and debates, and were, in effect, creating a new Chinese narrative on the 'multiple modernities of axial civilisations' (Eisenstadt, 2000). In what follows, I want to describe some of these ideas about Chinese civilisation that intellectuals, old and young, have formulated, and to link these to the concepts of civilisation as deployed in official discourse, adding a few of my own ideas along the way. This approach, I hope, corresponds with CREDOC's commitment to exploring the compatibility of different civilisations, and to opening up the field of research on comparative civilisations.

Civilisation as cultural consciousness

Let us first look at Professor Fei Xiaotong's ideas about civilisation. He was born in 1910, at a time when concepts of modern civilisation and culture were already important symbols of China's political worldview and ontology. As modern concepts, 'civilisation' and 'culture' entered China from Japan during the late nineteenth century in the years following the *100 Days Reform* (1898). 'Culture' became a renewed focus of debate when the *New Culture Movement* got under way in 1915 (Huang, 2006). These two concepts initially became expressions of an appreciation of the achievements of Western society, which in turn was closely associated with China's 'history of humiliation' since the late Qing dynasty. The two concepts were used to construct the idea of a new, strong and independent collective body, on the one hand referring to perfecting the external, material form of the Chinese nation (civilisation), and on the other to the internal cultivation of the national spirit (culture). The contradiction was that they were not always treasured as ways of linking the past and present. On the contrary, during the struggles of the

New Culture Movement of 1915, the *May Fourth Movement* (1919–1921) and the *Cultural Revolution* (1966–1976), they became the core stimuli of diverse political campaigns and discourses, all of which signified a rupture with tradition (Fei, 2005).

Fei Xiaotong's early studies of modern ethnology and social anthropology – from the American trained sociologist and anthropologist Wu Wenzao, the French trained Belarusian ethnologist Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogorov and the German and British trained Bronislaw Malinowski¹ – privileged the concepts of 'culture' and 'society' over the progressive material and technical implications of 'civilisation'. By the 1930s, when Fei turned to the study of the industrialisation and urbanisation of rural China, producing influential research on the relationship between China's social structure and the nation state, his work demonstrated clear links with Redfield's anthropology of civilisations, which defined rural societies not as so-called 'backward societies', but 'part societies'. These were said to be constituent parts of the larger system of 'civilisations' derived from indigenous 'primary civilisations' that predated the entry of Western power, and distinguished from 'secondary civilisations' corresponding with the transformations of modernisation, or as Redfield defined it, 'individualisation' (Redfield, 1956). From the late 1930s, Fei turned to the issue of the cultural relationships of China's multi-ethnic society, and after 1949, as an important scholar of the new China, he continued this work as part of the official project on ethnic minority surveys and the formulation of minority nationality policy. He was attacked as a 'rightist' during the late 1950s, only returning to the academic and political stage in 1978, when he played a key role in restoring the disciplines of sociology and ethnology. A decade later, following more research on ethnic diversity and the unity of China as a multi-national state, he made a strident, though gently worded critique of Stalin's nationalities theory. In doing so he adopted perspectives that differed from the anthropological worldview premised on the modern Western binary of 'self and other' and proposed instead a 'me within you' and 'you within me' formulation to describe the modern development of relations between China's Han and minority ethnicities.² By 1990, his attention had shifted to the global position of 'Chinese culture' – in his definition, heavily influenced by neo-Confucianism – which he summarised in the form of a 'sixteen character slogan' to refer to what might loosely be termed the 'great unity of aesthetic singularities'.³ Like his mentors, Fei drew on the notion of 'culture' much more than 'civilisation', but this 'slogan' pointed to the ideal state of mutual relationships among different civilisations; each civilisation should possess its own singular self-knowledge and self-respect, and at the same time should respect and appreciate other civilisations as the foundation of a world in which harmony and difference could co-exist.

In private conversation with me, Fei once commented that the US-centred Western world's violent and confrontational approach to dealing with differences between civilisations only exacerbated tensions and could not continue indefinitely. If the world wanted peace, it would have to explore non-Western methods of managing these differences. The classical Chinese saying of 'difference within

unity' – meaning that the preservation of difference depends on harmonious relationships – contained considerable wisdom, Fei suggested, which could contribute to the construction of the future world order. Fei was appalled by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* (Huntington, 1996) since he viewed it more as a response to the USA's position than as an analysis of the world. He preferred his own viewpoint.

China's contribution to the stability of the world order, however, required what he called a greater 'cultural self-consciousness' among Chinese intellectuals vis-à-vis their own culture and its position in the world (Fei, 2005, pp. 170–189). In his view, despite China's increasing political and economic global prominence since the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals understood the West better than they understood China; they lacked cultural self-knowledge. From time to time, Fei mentioned the mediating function of China's traditional literati in his ideas about 'self-consciousness'. As he argued in his early work on rural society, China's literati were the central node of China's 'social structure', and their power to shape and maintain an orthodoxy obedient to imperial power derived from their command of the written text (Fei, 1953). They also represented the social ideal of the 'moral' person. While such emphasis on the literati may be difficult to accept, Fei's status as an 'insider' who had experienced the massive campaigns of cultural self-destruction of the time needs to be acknowledged. We should not forget that after the *New Culture Movement* of 1915, there was an exaggerated 'reverence for the new and abandonment of the old'. Fei's 'cultural self-consciousness' thus implied a renewed recognition of China's past.

While I appreciate Fei's theory of social formation, I think that it has an internal tension. In my view, the source of this tension is an inconsistency between the ideas he developed in the 1990s and his earlier arguments about the industrialisation of village society. There were big gaps in his arguments about the relationship between the two, even though he sometimes tried to establish a logic between them. In the annual conference of the Association of Chinese Anthropology in 2000, he gave great prominence to the idea of the 'three levels and two jumps' advance in rural society's transition to industrial society, and a few months later, in an essay on the 're-recognition of the relationship between man and nature in culture', compared the cosmological perspectives of rural and industrial society in launching a robust critique of the polarisation between nature and culture urged by the modern culture of industrial society (Fei, 2004).

From 'spiritual civilisation' to 'ecological civilisation', and back to the *Book of Changes* and its misreadings

By the beginning of the new millennium, and regardless of its contested status, 'civilisation' was increasingly used by the government to refer to the reforms it sought to implement. Official documents and publications became flooded with references to 'material civilisation', 'political civilisation', 'legal civilisation', 'ecological civilisation' and so on. It was only at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, that

the government decided to replace the term with ‘construction’, only retaining it in the expression ‘ecological civilisation’,⁴ a subtle nudging of official discourse towards the notion of ‘cultural self-consciousness’ as propounded by Professor Fei.

Why retain ‘ecological civilisation’? In his report to the 18th Party Congress, Hu Jintao announced that: ‘We must give high priority to the construction of ecological civilisation [officially translated into English as ‘making ecological progress’] and incorporate it into all aspects of the whole process of advancing economic, political, cultural, and social progress, and work hard to build a beautiful country, and achieve lasting and sustainable development of the Chinese nation.’⁵ From the government’s perspective, ‘ecological civilisation’ is the key tool in the ‘project’ to integrate economic, political and cultural construction and to confront the grim situation created by the tight constraints on natural resources, environmental pollution and degradation of the ecosystem. This could be achieved by respecting, responding to and protecting nature, thus providing the basis for a ‘harmonious relationship between people and nature’, and the ‘sustainable development’ of our ‘beautiful country’.⁶

As the goal of ‘national sustainable development’, ‘ecological civilisation’ encompasses the notions of progress and development associated with industrialisation and the ecological theories of ‘agricultural civilisation’. In this, it bears many resemblances to Fei Xiaotong’s early and late 20th-century narratives on industrialisation and self-consciousness. As policy, it puts development and ecology on the same platform and although it gives greater prominence to the environment than previous policies it subtly implies that ‘ecological civilisation’ is an ideal social form that follows agricultural society, industrial society, and the information society. It fails to acknowledge the contradiction between industrialisation and the environment.

I now want to explain briefly how the Chinese idiograms used to translate ‘civilisation’ and ‘culture’ serve to shape and transform them into Chinese concepts. The Japanese version of ‘civilisation’ (*wenming*) that filtered into Chinese in the nineteenth century drew on the Chinese classic *The Book of Changes*, but without retaining the entire original meaning of the two characters. The term ‘civilisation’ has been explained in many ways, but the phrase in which it appears in *The Book of Changes* – ‘文明以止，人文也，(*wen mingweizhi, ren wen ye*)’ has consistently been understood to refer to a humane rather than martial method of managing intervention in matters of difference (whether between China and ‘barbarians’ or between people and things). After the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) *wenming* and *wenhua* (later translated as ‘culture’) variously referred to methods that relied on the ‘pattern’ or ‘culture’ (*wen*) and education as opposed to military means, to manage the relationship between ‘other’ (barbarian) and ‘self’ (China). *Wen* was the core character the two concepts shared, which in classical Chinese referred to the interlocking lines or patterns of the material world – the cosmological spheres of nature/heaven, earth, water, and humanity and the ideas and arrangements of the human world. The association between ‘*wen*’ and writing and the text, institutions and civility, only appeared later. In its original meaning, *wen* thus referred to

cosmology and only later was it extended to refer to the social sphere. The sentence that follows the above quote from the *Book of Changes* is ‘观乎天文，以察时变；观乎人文，以化成天下’: the formation of order in the human world is premised on the correspondence between the ‘patterns of heaven’ and the ‘patterns of humanity.’ In other words, in ancient times, *wenming* referred to the correspondence between the human world – family, state and empire – and the cosmological order. In later times, the composite notion of *wenhua*, drawn from this earlier reference, and used to translate ‘culture’, referred to the appropriate use of the cosmological-geographic order to transform ‘all under heaven.’ If ‘*wenming*’ in the *Book of Changes* was close to the notion of ‘culture’, then the idea of ‘*wenming*’ formulated by Japanese and Chinese scholars at the end of the 19th century, and sustained until today, approximates the idea of ‘culture’ as ‘transforming all under heaven’. ‘*Wenhua*’ thus appears to be very similar to ‘civilisation’, but since its inclusion of ‘transformation’ (*hua*) addresses ‘all under heaven’ and not nationalities and states, it cannot be an appropriate translation for ‘civilisation.’

The 2013 official concept of ‘ecological civilisation’ seems nearer to the *Book of Changes* idea of *wenming* than many previous narratives, and the current ‘classicisation’ of the term, has produced a kind of ‘cultural self-consciousness’ just as it did with Professor Fei. The government, however, is far more cautious when it comes to history, and compared to Fei’s ideas, the symbols it deploys are far more limited and closed. Fei carved out a historical trail for an ‘ecological civilisation’ that existed in China long before industrialisation and which, he argued, should be retrieved because of its global value. By contrast, the government recognises that industrialisation and development can bring ecological destruction, and so looks to ‘ecological civilisation’ as a feature in China’s future. It does not refer to the wisdom of the relationship between humanity and nature in China that Fei wrote about.

History as ‘credentials’ or ‘burden’

In the past 20 years, I have maintained close contact with archaeologists working in the southeastern, southwestern and northwestern borderlands of China, and we have realised that research into the archaeological ‘frontiers’ of the origins of civilisation reveals a kind of ‘pride of place’ that has connotations of cultural openness and exchange, ones that transcend some notions of China as unified entity. For all these remarkable local archaeologists, the origins of civilisation are as basic and important to archaeological research as is the cultural diversity of China’s main Han areas, long emphasised by the leading Chinese archaeologist, Su Bingqi.⁷ But this is not enough for them; for them the notion of ‘dissemination’ offers the best explanation for the material and religious exchanges that have occurred in the history of the places they live and work, and which transcend national borders.

Amongst Chinese folklorists, ethnologists and religious studies scholars, there are also signs of a new understanding about Chinese civilisation.

Chinese folklorists have been committed to research into folk culture – as a domain quite removed from elite culture – since the early 20th century (Wang, 1987), and since the 1990s, working together with historians on the cultural diversity of Han culture, they have shown that there is little basis to the idea that ‘Chinese thought’ is defined by China’s ‘big tradition’. Beyond imperial and elite culture, they argue, are many ‘folk cultures’ specifically tied to local geopolitical systems, and not subsets of ‘China’ (Ye and Zhou, 2010). With the recent opening up of religious studies, scholars have increasingly been conducting historical and ethnographic research that reveals the symbiotic character of religions in China; Daoism and folk religions indigenous to China co-existed with the ‘external’ religions of Buddhism, Judeo-Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The dialogue between archaeological, folkloric, ethnological and religious studies of China’s ‘borders’ will continue to strengthen, and may come up with new narratives of civilisation that reveal the long history of the exchanges between the civilisations of Eurasia, the relationships between Eurasia and other continents, and the deep influence of these relationships on the formation of Chinese civilisation (Mu, 2008). These fields of archaeology, folkloric studies, ethnology and religious studies, however, remain at the academic margins. The intellectual core of the academic world in China is wedded to the notion of the internal homogeneity of national culture and does not pay much attention to research that challenges the centre or harbour the possibility of multiple ‘civilisations’.

‘Civilisation’ in the dominant intellectual circles expresses two different concepts about the relationship between the ‘before and after’, and that between ‘internal and external’. By ‘before and after’ I mean history and views about history, and by ‘internal and external’ I mean the relationships articulated from within and outside the boundaries of a shared community. To put it broadly, China’s ‘New Left’ conceptualises the relationship between ‘internal and external’ through a focus on returning to ‘before’ from ‘after’ while the ‘liberals’ think about the links between ‘before and after’ through the relationships between ‘internal and external’. The former is more open to history, and while the latter has a stronger teleological flavour, it is closed to history, but more open to the ‘external’. The former sees the history of Chinese civilisation as providing China’s *credentials* for its place in the world, while the teleological emphasis of the latter sees civilisation as an historical burden on reform.

There is a normative tendency among many Chinese legal scholars, political scientists, economists and sociologists to limit their view of history to the Mao and Deng eras only and, inexplicably, linking these to Medieval Europe and the Enlightenment or to ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ society. Having said that, there are some prominent thinkers who have moved beyond this short-sighted view of history, and they make critical comments about the ‘road’ – Mao’s or Deng’s – at times they choose to adopt a longer term historical framework as the basis for discussion.

Beginning in the late 1990s, a young generation of neo-Confucianists came to be influenced by overseas neo-Confucian scholars’ research on the history of ideas.

Notably, some of them became committed to linking Confucian thought to Chinese-style modernisation. Professor Tu Wei-ming's ideas are among the most influential in this regard. After his directorship of the Harvard Yenching Institute, he was appointed Distinguished Professor at Peking University in 2010, where he set up the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. He had already been extremely influential in China through his 1970s exploration of the spiritual value of Confucianism and his later ideas about 'Confucian modernity', and following the publication of Huntington's speculations about the 'clash of civilisations', he broadened his research to address what he called the 'dialogue between civilisations' and the 'humanistic spirit'. He was fiercely critical of Huntington's argument which he took to be only a reflection of a narrow, US political stance. He agreed that there were conflicts between civilisations, but noted that such conflicts also existed *within* civilisational systems. All civilisations, he argued, faced their own internal problems, in particular the conflict between economic development and environmental destruction, and between improvements in material life and the reduction of spiritual values. A collective solution to the problems all civilisations faced therefore depended on broad dialogue between them. As a neo-Confucianist, Tu argued that China's Confucian civilisation was an axial civilisation, as Karl Jaspers put it, which could be applied to humanity as a whole. Its values – encouraging reflection on the body, mind, soul and spirit to promote the sustainable development of the human personality – lay in both moral and religious practice and had great significance for the solution of conflict within different civilisations (Tu, 1997).

As an anthropologist interested in history, I have also written a few things on this. In my view, European and US sociology since the mid-19th century, particularly in its application in China, has been premised on the nation as the basic unit of research. With the emergence of the modern concept of 'Chinese history' in the early 20th century, historical narratives shifted away from their previous focus on the dynasty, empire and lineage, towards Western-style ethno-biographical perspectives. The same occurred when sociology arrived in China, on the one hand falling into the pitfall of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and on the other harnessing tradition on behalf of modernity. Exploring the concept of 'all under heaven' was an attempt to explain that political life was not constrained by the idea of the nation-state (before it became China's political ideal). Modern Western social scientists have been inordinately concerned with the distinction between nation and civilisation, and even Marcel Mauss – who made important arguments about the concept of nation-state – and his colleagues argued that 'the political and legal systems and social morphology constitute a unique part of each nation' (Mauss, 2006). By contrast, 'civilisation' and related systems of myth and legend, trade and technology, are fluid and distributed across national systems, making it difficult to identify what might be uniquely national.

The ancient concept of 'all under heaven', on the other hand implies that in ancient China, nation/people and civilisation were not oppositional concepts. Before the 8th-century BCE, political life in Chinese civilisation featured a diverse

range of ideas about political and legal systems and social organisation, all intertwined with ideas about geography and the cosmos, and which effectively functioned as ‘standards of international relations’. At the very least, in the Zhou dynasty, these ‘standards’ mainly referred to a code of ethics based on a system of rites. To understand this a bit more, we would need to look into the mythical and religious beliefs in East Asia before the 8th-century BCE, as well as the different definitions of the concept that emerged in the gradual class transition away from ‘sorcerers’ and ‘priests’ to ‘scholars’ (*shi*). If we were to do this, then we would not make the mistake of thinking that Confucian ideas about ‘all under heaven’ were the only legacy of ancient Chinese civilisation. Furthermore, analysis of the changes in the ancient idea of ‘all under heaven’ that followed the rise of the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC to 200 AD) shows that the historical notion of ‘all under heaven’ has by no means only been associated with mythical, religious and epistemological meanings, but has also often been linked to imperial military power and the tributary trade system (Wang, 2005). Research on classical Chinese history tells us that the ideas about ‘openness’ implied by the concept of ‘under heaven’ could no longer be sustained after the mid Tang the conflicts between the ‘Han’ Chinese dynasties of the Song and Ming with what Owen Lattimore called the ethnic forces ‘beyond the Great Wall’ (Lattimore, 1989) produced a self-definition nearer to that of the ‘state’, in other words a level beneath ‘all under heaven’. What is amusing is that both the Mongol Yuan dynasty which replaced the Song and the Manchu Qing dynasty which replaced the Ming came much nearer to the ‘under heaven’ idea than the other two (Wang, 2008, 2009). Thus, in order to understand classical China, we need to go beyond the fluctuating fortunes of ‘openness’ or ‘closedness’ of ‘all under heaven’ to look at the centring of the margins that emerges from the ideas of ‘all under heaven’ created by those the ancient Chinese defined as ‘barbarians’ on China’s margins.

China’s current intellectual scene represents, in part, an attempt to rebuild its sense of self-identity on the basis of a linear temporality. Whether it is the ‘Liberals’, the ‘New Left’ or the ‘neo-Confucianists’, there is a clear aim to create a logical narrative leads that entails a clear chronological distinction between China’s past, present and future. Their main concerns focus on something that has been defined as the ‘Chinese dream’. For them, history and current reality are no more than a ‘road’ towards the future.

Just as representatives of these tendencies have different ideas about the future, their ideas about history and the present also differ. In general terms, the efforts of the ‘neo-Confucianists’ and the ‘New Left’ are to push the present back to the past, the beautiful past – whether this is the time of Confucius or the Mao era – and through this to try to correct today’s mistaken methods. Whether they take Western liberalism as their blueprint or believe that there is a universal quest for freedom, most of them describe ancient China as a traditional society that runs through to the Mao era; that is replete with Oriental despotism; and that lacks the modern market, as well as legal and political civilisation – ignoring all other possible ideas of temporality. The gaps in these linear temporal narratives also have a

deep spatial relevance. Among the diverse contemporary theories of civilisation, some tend towards 'turning back in history', selecting diachronic or vertical clues to search for ancestral teachings, and from this defining 'Chinese civilisation' as an internally unitary sphere differentiated from external space. There is also a tendency towards a synchronic and horizontal trans-spatial view, in which in the same way, China appears as a unitary sphere that differs from external space. In linking the past and the future, all these tendencies stand at the intersection of the before and after, and the inner and outer, and because of this are unable to explain history's logic through a linear narrative.⁸

* * *

In Mauss's words, '[t]he history of civilisations is the history of the circulation and flow the multiple variety of objects and achievements between different societies' (Mauss, 2006). There is no time now to discuss the other concepts and practices of civilisation (for example, rural and urban) beyond those in the fields of politics and thought that I have touched on here. Nor do I have time to discuss Mauss's idea of the mobile and fluid nature of civilisation. However, I hope that I have been able to show that as one kind of social 'achievement', the concept of civilisation itself is also mobile and fluid in the same way.

The fluidity of concepts such as 'civilisation' may be described as the circulation of ideas which, in distinction to the 'circulation of nature', involves subjects with the capacity to reflect. It involves a process of translation. When a concept such as 'civilisation' reached East Asia and gained significance, first in the encounter between Japan – the first to 'Westernise' – and encountered seemingly corresponding concepts in ancient China, (via the *Book of Changes*), the concept was then translated and re-translated because it served a key purpose in China's emerging social situation. The fusion of ideas in this process produced different interpretations – new appropriations became new translations of the concept. Different schools of political and intellectual thought doubtless all bring their own creativity to their interpretation of the concept, but none of this creativity can be understood as pure 'discovery' because the substance of the distinctions between the various interpretations are differently empowered versions. We may, therefore, suggest that the differences amongst the different schools are simultaneously mutually dependent, and feed off of each other. The ancient Chinese characters that represented 'translate' ('*e*' and '*hua*') can be loosely rendered as 'to falsify, transform, to convert', which is to say that translation is a transformation of words/meanings, with denotation constantly giving way to connotation (Wang, 2005). The way the European words civilisation and culture were translated into Japanese and Chinese and so found in their respective pasts is typical of the fluidity of civilisations, the bringing in of the outside.

I do not want to suggest that we should stop with the 'interpretation of the interpretation' and not articulate our political views. (In fact, I have a certain yearning for the 'civilisation' as defined in the *Book of Changes*, since I think that

as a ‘middle way’ (*zhongyongzhidao*)⁹ of arranging relationships amongst people, things and spirits, it could provide a common agenda. Rather, what I want to suggest is a political principle that emerges from the meaning of translations and re-translations: there is no such thing as a pure self and pure other; we are ‘one of the other’, and what ‘civilisation’ points to may be none other than this.

We now have a Research Centre on Civilisation, a matter for great celebration. I don’t know whether there are any other such centres elsewhere the world, but we have one here, under the name of Dynamic Civilisations. The mission of the Centre is to bring together colleagues to compare the geographical, material, cultural, and ethnic structures of civilisations, to explore their historical roots, and to probe the relationships between all these and the big questions of development, environment, history, culture, science and technology. It has another mission as well, to study the compatibility amongst different civilisations. Achieving these very different aims will be no easy matter, but I believe that reflecting on several different issues together is the correct approach. And if my ‘story of the translation’ of the concept of civilisation can mean anything, it is that the translations and retranslations of civilisation in modern China are related both to the cultural, scientific and technological and environmental issues of Sino-Western relations since the modern era, and to the long history of Eurasia and the world. If one were to say that all ideas about civilisation, the renaissance, capitalism, academe, democracy, individualism, love and so on that have been so historically influential in Europe and the world all have a bearing on the ‘East’ beyond Europe, then it would also be appropriate to say that the civilisations of Eurasia have for many centuries been characterised by what one could describe as ‘me within you, and you within me’. ‘There are mountains beyond the mountains’, and the self-recognition of civilisations not only relies on the traditions passed down from the ancestors, but on civilisations beyond civilisation.

Acknowledgement

I thank Professors Maria Wyke and Michael Rowlands for their kind invitation and Professor Harriet Evans for her translation. I also thank Ms. Sun Jing for assisting me while I was preparing for the paper and Professor Stephan Feuchtwang for commenting on this lecture.

Notes

1. For different perspectives on this historical transformation, see Tu (1994).
2. In his later years, Fei Xiaotong reflected on the formation of his pedagogical and academic views. See Xiaotong (2001).
3. *First put forward* at an ‘International Conference on East Asian Societies’ in Tokyo in December 1990, the *sixteen characters* of this slogan were ‘各美其美, 美人之美, 美美与共, 天下大同’ (*gemei qi mei, meirenzhimei, meimeiyu gong, tianxiadatong*); the last four characters were changed to ‘和而不同’ (*he erbutong*) (Fei, 2005, pp. 167–175, 190–198).
4. Hu Jintao, ‘坚定不移沿着中国特色社会主义道路前进, 为全面建成小康社会而奋斗’, (*JiandingbuyiyanzheZhongguoshehuizhuyitesedaoluqianjin, weiquanmianjianchengxiaokangshehuierfendou*: Unswervingly advance along the road to socialism with

- Chinese characteristics, and struggle for the comprehensive establishment of a moderately prosperous society), 8 November 2012, in «中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会文件汇编» (*Zhongguogongchandang di shiba ci quanguodaibiaodahuiwenjianhuibian*: Collected Documents of the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party), Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2012, p. 8. On November 14, 2012, the Central Committee further emphasised the need to prioritise 'the construction of ecological civilisation'. See «中国共产党党章» (修正案) (*Zhongguogongchandangdangzhang (xiuzheng an)*: Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (revisions), in Collected Documents of the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, p. 98.
5. See Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Congress, 'Unswervingly advance along the road...'
 6. *Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party* (revisions), pp. 36–38.
 7. Su Bingqi was profoundly influenced by Fei Xiaotong's work on the diversity and singularity of cultures (Su, 1997).
 8. In my view, it is largely those at the margins of mainstream academia, who work in fields such as border area archaeology, ethnology, folkloric studies, and the history of overseas communications, who may be able to offer explanations for the internal contradictions of today's main intellectual tendencies. Sadly, these fields do not yet have the capacity to enter into dialogue with the current 'dominant' narratives on civilisation.
 9. t.n. This phrase draws on the philosophical notion of the 'Mean', one of the chapters in the Confucian Classic, the *Book of Rites*.

References

- Eisenstadt S (2000) The civilizational dimension in sociological analysis. *Thesis Eleven* 62: 1–21.
- Fei X-T (1953) *China's Gentry: Essays in Rural-Urban Relations*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Fei X-T (2001) «师承.补课.治学» (*Shicheng, buke, zhixue*) (*Teaching, Studying and Scholarship*). Beijing: Joint Publishing Company.
- Fei X-T (2004) «论人类学与文化自觉» (*Lunrenleixueyuwenhuazijue*: On anthropology and cultural consciousness). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, pp. 225–234.
- Fei X-T (2005) «论文化与文化自觉» (*Lunwenhuayuwenhuazijue*: On Culture and Cultural Self-Consciousness). Beijing: Qunyan Publishing House, p. 536.
- Huang X-T (2006) The formation and historical practice of the modern concepts of 'civilization' and 'culture' in the late Qing and early republic. *Jindaishiyanjiu (Modern History Research)* 6: 6–8.
- Huntington S (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Mauss M (2006) *Techniques, Technology and Civilization*. New York and London: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books.
- Mu Z-J (2008) «中国宗教通史» (*Zhongguozongjiaotongshi: History of Chinese Religions*). Beijing: Shehuikexuewenxian Publishing House.
- Lattimore O (1989) *Inner Asian Frontiers of Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Redfield R (1956) *Peasant Society and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Su B-Q (1997) «中国文明起源新探» (*Zhongguowenmingqiyuanxin tan: New explorations into the Sources of Chinese Civilisation*). Shanghai: Commercial Press.
- Tu W-M (1997) «现代精神与儒家传统» (*Xiandaijingshenyurujiachuantong: The Modern Spirit and Confucian Tradition*). Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, pp. 29–41.

- Tu W-M (ed.) (1994) *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wang M-M (2005) “作为世界图式的‘天下’”(Zuoweishijietushi de ‘tianxia’: ‘All under heaven’ as a world schema). In: 《西学中国化的历史困境》(*Xixue ‘Zhongguohua’ de lishikunjing: The Historical Dilemma of the ‘Sinicisation’ of Western Learning*). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing House, pp. 214–288.
- Wang M-M (2005) ‘文化翻译中的‘诱’、‘讹’与‘化’’, (*Wenhua fanyizhong de ‘tou’, ‘e’ yu ‘hua’*: ‘Tou’, ‘e’ and ‘hua’ in the translation of ‘wenhua’ (culture). In: 《西方人类学思潮十讲》(*Xifangrenleixuesichaoshijiang: Ten Lectures on Trends in Western Anthropology*). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing House, pp. 173–190.
- Wang M-M (2008) 《中间圈: 藏彝走廊与人类学的再构思》(*Zhongjianquan: ‘Zang-Yi zoulanguyurenleixue de zaigousi. The Middle Circle: New Reflections on the ‘Tibetan-Yi corridor’ and Anthropology*). Beijing: Shehuikexuexian Publishing House.
- Wang M-M (2009) *Empire and Local Worlds: A Chinese Model for Long-Term Historical Anthropology*. California: LeftCoast Press.
- Wang W-B (1987) 《中国民俗学史》 Zhongguo Minsuxue Shi. *The History of Chinese Folklore*. Shenyang: Liaoning University Publishing House.
- Ye T and Zhou S-M (eds) (2010) 《民间信仰与区域社会》(*Mingjianxinyangyuquyushehui: Folk Beliefs and Regional Society*). Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Publishing House.
- Zhuo X-P (2008) 《全球化的宗教与当代中国》(*Quanqiuhua de zongjiaoyudangdai Zhongguo: Globalised Religions and Contemporary China*). Beijing: Social Science Books Publishing House.

Author Biography

Wang Mingming is a university Professor of Anthropology at Peking University and Tianshan Professor of Ethnology in Xinjiang Normal University. He has written ethnographically and theoretically on the anthropology of China, history, and comparative cosmology and civilisation. His numerous works include *Social Anthropology and Sinology* (1997), *Grassroots Charisma* (co-authored with Stephan Feuchtwang, 2001), *The Historical Dilemma of the “Sinification” of a Western Science* (2005), *The Intermediaries* (2008), *Empire and Local Worlds* (2009), *Transcending the New “Warring States”* (2012), and *The West as the Other* (2014).