INTRODUCTION

ENGINEERING

CHINESE CIVILISATION

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Excerpt from

CHINA STORY YEARBOOK 2013

CIVILISING CHINA

Edited by

Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn
As China becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, it also expects to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and as a formidable civilisation. Through a survey and analysis of China’s regional posture, urban change, social activism and law, mores, the Internet, history and thought — in which the concept of ‘civilising’ plays a prominent role — *China Story Yearbook 2013* offers insights into the country today and its dreams for the future.
Xinhua News Agency launched a nationwide photography contest asking participants to capture 'My China Dream'; numerous middle and high schools held essay contests to see which students could write most convincingly about what the China Dream meant to them. At the Pengzhai primary school in Guizhou province, Ma Lingtong’s dream is to be a teacher.
Towards the end of May 2013, a Chinese tourist, a teenager, carved his name into the wall of the 3,500-year-old Luxor Temple in Egypt, sparking an uproar of outrage and self-reflection in China. China’s new Vice-Premier, Wang Yang, was already so concerned about the harm badly behaved travellers were doing to China’s image abroad that he had spoken about it publicly just a few weeks earlier. According to a news report,
on 16 May 2013, in the course of an official teleconference organised to promote a new tourism law:

Wang Yang emphasised that due to the popularisation of tourism among the Chinese, an increasing number of people were traveling overseas, where they are generally welcomed by the countries of the world. But some tourists display poor quality and breeding, and display uncivilised conduct such as shouting in public spaces, carving graffiti on tourist sites, crossing against the light and spitting. They’re frequently criticised by the [foreign host] media, to the detriment of the image of their countrymen.

Wang Yang’s solution: enhance the civilised qualities of China’s citizens.

The Origins of ‘I was here’ Graffiti
In the classical novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyou ji 西游记), the Buddha fools the Monkey King (Sun Wukong 孙悟空) by promising that if he can manage to leap out of the Buddha’s palm, he can occupy the Celestial Throne. The over-confident Monkey King accepts the challenge, jumps into the Buddha’s palm and then does an almighty somersault, tumbling through the air for thousands of miles. Finally, coming to rest at a place where five massive pillars reach into the sky, the Monkey King promptly scratches the following characters into the middle pillar to prove he was there:

老孙到此一游 (Lao Sun dao ci yiyou ‘Old Sun was here’)

The Monkey King then takes another almighty leap back where he came from, and lands back in the Buddha’s palm – or so he thinks. But to his great consternation, he looks down at the bottom of the Buddha’s middle finger, where he sees the characters he himself had just carved: ‘Old Sun was here’. He had in fact never left the Buddha’s palm, and had merely defaced the latter’s middle finger.

For nearly a century, efforts to modernise Chinese society have focused on the issues of the quality (suzhi 素质) and level of civilisation (wenming 文明) of China’s population.

*Suzhi* 素质
‘Suzhi’, ‘quality’ or ‘human quality’, is a term frequently used in defence of paternalistic rule, or what we today call the ‘nanny state’. It was common during China’s Republican era (1912–1949). *Suzhi* also crops up in internal debates about whether China is a civilised country. It describes a person’s qualities measured in terms of behaviour, education, ethics/ambition. It is related to the concepts of ‘breeding’ (jiaoyang 教养) and ‘personal cultivation’ or refinement (xiuyang 修养). Yet it is distinct from *zhiliang* 质量, which also means ‘quality’, but refers to a more straightforward good-or-bad evaluation (as in food or manufactured products) and is not normally used to describe a person. People can have or lack *suzhi*, and for the narrow minded or bigoted, if a person is without *suzhi*, due to perceived innate qualities, background, appearance or personal history, nothing can be done about it.

In general, however, it is argued that a person’s *suzhi* can be cultivated or trained. The concept of *suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育 is often translated as ‘quality education’ but it is closer in meaning to ‘moral education’ or even ‘a well-rounded education’ (including ideological and physical education). It involves an attempt to move away from test-oriented teaching toward critical thinking, problem solving, and other analytical skills. In his work on ‘quality education’, the educator Yan Guocai classifies *suzhi* into eight types spanning three categories:

- **Natural quality (ziran suzhi 自然素质)** This is innate, and encompasses one’s physical state (shenti suzhi 身体素质)
- **Psychological quality (xinli suzhi 心理素质)** This is a combination of innate and nurtured emotional and mental states
- **Social quality (shehui suzhi 社会素质)** This is nurtured, and encompasses one’s political level (zhengzhi suzhi 政治素质), intellectual ability (xueshu suzhi 学术素质), moral nature (jiaoyang道德素质), vocational attainment (yewu suzhi 业务素质), sense of aesthetics (meishu suzhi 审美素质), and labour skills (laoji suzhi 劳技素质).

On the flip side, rudeness and bad behaviour are commonly considered marks of ‘low quality’. As China’s population increasingly encounters the world, the official media attacks bad behaviour and the government launches initiatives to ‘enhance the quality of the nation’. The government frequently cites the ‘poor quality’ of the citizenry as a justification for delaying democratic reforms. This view extends beyond the official sphere: in a notorious blog post made at the close of 2011, the outspoken young blogger Han Han wrote:

Citizens of low quality (*suzhi di 素质低*) will not prevent the arrival of democracy, but will determine its future quality (*zhiliang 质量*). No one wants Rwandan-style democracy.
Late-Qing thinkers like Liang Qichao (1873–1929) spoke too of the need to remake the national character (guominxing 国民性) so that China could slough off tradition and become a vibrant, modern state. During the Republican era, in 1934, the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek launched a ‘New Life Movement’ to counter the influence of Communist ideology and to correct backward aspects of traditional public behaviour; it promoted such qualities as orderliness, cleanliness, simplicity, frugality, promptness, precision, harmoniousness and dignity and was partly influenced by Chiang’s Christian beliefs. (After Chiang was baptised in 1929, foreign observers joked that there was ‘Methodism in his madness’.)

After invading China in 1937, the Japanese attempted to impose their version of modern Asian behaviour on the country. When, in the late 1940s, the Chinese Communist Party came to power, it also quickly moved to clean up the vestiges of what it called ‘feudal’ China to create a model, new, socialist People’s Republic. Meanwhile, after Chiang’s government retreated to Taiwan, campaigns to transform the citizenry continued, not always with great success, as the satirist and historian Bo Yang noted in his controversial 1985 book The Ugly Chinaman (Chouloude Zhongguoren 丑陋的中国人).

During the Maoist years (1949–1978), frequent civic campaigns aimed to transform the Chinese into a people who put the collective before the individual, production before consumption and the Party above all else. People may recall the mass destruction wreaked by the movement to ‘Destroy the Four Olds’ (po sijiu 破四旧: old Customs, old Culture, old Habits and Old Ideas) during the first phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). But it is now generally forgotten that the destruction was supposed to clear the way for the people to ‘Establish the Four News’ (li sixin 立四新): New Customs, New Culture, New Habits and New Ideas in other words, to create a transformed, and universally applicable, Chinese civilisation under the guiding light of Mao Zedong Thought — though the word ‘civilisation’ itself was eschewed. Meanwhile, on Taiwan, and in direct response to the Cultural Revolution on the Mainland, the authorities launched a campaign to revive Chinese culture (Zhonghua wenhua fuxing yundong 中华文化复兴运动). It was used to promote traditional ethical norms and cultural values in ways both that harked back to the New Life Movement of the 1930s and presaged the language of revivalism that has become a feature of life on the Mainland today.
Following Mao’s death in 1976 and the formal end of the Cultural Revolution with its extremist politics, civilisation began to feature in Chinese politics and public discourse once more. In his National Day speech for 1979, at the time when the Party was launching the Open Door and Reform policies, the People’s Liberation Army leader Marshal Ye Jianying recalled the devastation of the Cultural Revolution years and called on the country not only to build the economy — its ‘material civilisation’ (wuzhi wenming 物质文明) — but also to reconstruct China’s ‘spiritual civilisation’ (jingshen wenming 精神文明). In drawing a distinction between these two forms of civilisation, Ye’s words harked back to a debate about creating modern Asian societies that had been going on for at least a century.

The Sino-Japanese word for ‘civilisation’, wenming in Chinese pronunciation and bunmei in Japanese, written in both cases as 文明, was coined in 1867 by the Japanese thinker Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), who had been influenced by François Guizot’s 1828 General History of Civilisation in Europe. Fukuzawa elaborated on the concept in his book An Outline of the Theory of Civilization:

What, then, does civilization mean? I say that it refers to the attainment of both material well-being and the elevation of the human spirit. It means both abundance of daily necessities and esteem for human refinement. Is it civilization if only the former is fulfilled? The goal of life does not lie in food and clothes alone. If that were man’s goal, he would be no different from an ant or a bee. This cannot be what Heaven has intended for man. …[T]here must be both material and spiritual aspects before one can call it civilization.

While it carries this historical and philosophical baggage, in common parlance, wenming is often used in a sense that is more akin to the concept of ‘civility’ or ‘decorum’. It is this sense that is summoned by the frequent civic campaigns against ‘uncivilised behavior’ (buwenming xingwei 不文明行为) like spitting, littering, jaywalking, loitering and treading on the grass.

Constructing Socialist Civilisation

Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader and acclaimed ‘general engineer’ (zong gongchengshi 总工程师) of China’s post-1978, post-Cultural Revolution Reform era, described spiritual civilisation as encompassing education, science, culture, communist ideology, morality, a revolutionary attitude and other abstract ideas. He warned against the dangers of ‘spiritual pollution’ (jingshen wuran 精神污染), including dangerous ideas from the West (‘flies and mosquitoes’ that would come in through China’s Open Door) and, in 1983, unleashed a nationwide campaign against it. At the same time, the authorities promoted ‘Five Behavioural Standards, Four Points of Beauty’ (wu jiang si mei 五讲四美), with ‘civility’ (jiang wenming 讲文明) as the very first standard, defined to include courtesies such as saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ that had fallen out of use in the Mao era when such niceties were denigrated as bourgeois.
The authorities regarded the reintroduction of the concept of civility as crucially important for the rebuilding of public life following the long years of political infighting, fear-mongering campaigns and general brutishness. Fears that the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign could revive political stridency into Chinese life and possibly stifle nascent economic reforms led to leaders cutting the purge short, but the long tail of ideological rectitude and anti-Western attitudes continued to have an influence in subsequent campaigns (the 1987 attack on ‘bourgeois liberalisations’ and the post-4 June 1989 purge of dissidents), and do so to this day.

The Party Central Committee incorporated the new long-term campaign to promote party-ordained social principles into its 1986 ‘Resolution on Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Society with Spiritual Civilisation’ (Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe zhidao fangzhendeguoyin). This campaign would unfold in tandem with a gradual revival of traditional, conservative social values and authoritarian politics, creating the ideological bedrock of contemporary China.

In 1997, the Party established a Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilisation (Zhongyang jingshen wenming jianshe zhiu yuanhui 中央精神文明建设指导委员会), the activities of which feature throughout this Yearbook. Its operational arm, the Central Office of Spiritual Civilisation (known as Zhongyang wenming bangongshi 中央文明办公室), is typically headed up by a deputy director of the Party's Central Publicity Department (in less media-savvy times known in English as the Central Propaganda Department). In April 2006, China’s major state-run news portals released a joint ‘Proposal for a Civilised Internet’ (Wenming banwang changyishu 文明办网倡议书) in which they pledged to promote ‘mainstream values’ and cultivate a ‘healthy online environment’. They took President Hu Jintao’s ‘Eight Honours and Eight Shames’ (ba rong ba chi 八荣八耻) as their guiding principles, which were also heavily promoted by the Office of Spiritual Civilisation.

In 2007, the Commission launched a national campaign to ‘Welcome the Olympics, Promote Civility, and Create a Favourable Social Environment’ (ying Aoyun jiang wenming shu xinfeng 迎奥运 讲文明 树新风), and it continues to promote both national and local good behavior campaigns. The Office sponsors the Civilised Cities (wenming chengshi 文明城市) project, which assesses cities based on a wide range of ‘civilised’ criteria. Civilisation has traditionally been so closely identified with cities that there are now initiatives to ‘send civilisation to the countryside’ (wenming xiaxiang 文明下乡), involving technological and medical assistance as well as culture and entertainment for people living in rural areas.

The Party has championed other aspects of civilisation in the wake of its Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012, turning the phrase ‘ecological civilisation’ (shengtai wenming 生态文明), for example, into an environmental buzzword. With the advent of the new leadership, a ‘civilising’ austerity drive was launched as well. This time around calls to fight against widespread corruption were linked to the viability of the Communist Party and the army itself and they were accompanied by dire warnings that if the cancer was not cut out, or severely limited, the People’s Republic would be facing an existential crisis.
Frugality as Civilised Behaviour

Close on the heels of Xi Jinping’s calls to limit lavish government spending and corruption came a ‘civilised dining table’ (wenming canzhuo 文明餐桌) initiative to discourage over-ordering and encourage diners to clean their plates. Xi himself is said regularly to request meals consisting of a meagre ‘four dishes and one soup course’.

The expression ‘four dishes and one soup’ (si cai yi tang 四菜一汤) has been in common bureaucratic parlance since the fourteenth century when the founding ruler of the Ming dynasty, the Hongwu emperor (Zhu Yuanzhang, 1328–1398), decided to do something about the excessive wining and dining among his own officials. In the early years of the Communist Party’s Reform era, much too was made of limiting official meals to ‘four dishes and one soup course’.

In fact, drives for frugality date back to the Party’s days in Yan’an in the early 1940s. Yet due to a lack of independent supervision and sustained political will, they usually peter out after a suitable interval. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping has made a point of attempting to reconcile the economic boom generated by the Reform policies with the Communist values of plain-living and frugality championed in the early years of the People’s Republic under Mao. After coming to power, the new Party General Secretary signalled his intention to honour both the legacy of what is known as the Maoist ‘first three decades’ of the People’s Republic (1949–1978) and that of the ‘second three decades’ of the Reform era (1978–2008) by retracing Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 Southern Tour and then, half a year later, visiting Xibaipo, Hebei province, the last way station of the Communist Party under Mao as it prepared to move on Beijing in 1948.

The German sociologist Norbert Elias famously noted in his work on ‘the civilising process’ that curbing and guiding social behaviour is regarded by many as a mark of ‘civilisation’, which may be defined as the opposite of barbarity. In January 2013, Xi Jinping himself said it was necessary to ‘keep power restricted in a cage of regulations’ (ba quanli guanjin 保持权力在制度的笼子里).

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Xi Jinping’s Southern Tour and Xibaipo

From 7 to 11 December 2012, newly installed Party General Secretary Xi Jinping embarked on a ‘Southern Tour’ (nan xun 南巡), evoking an imperial tradition started by Qing-dynasty emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), whose first Southern Tour took him to Suzhou and Jiangning (now Nanjing) in Jiangsu province in 1684. Xi’s trip was an explicit reference to a more recent Southern Tour. By stopping in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan and Guangzhou, he revisited the sites of Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour of 1992. That tour, following the military crackdown on public protest in 1989, was devised to rebut conservative elements within the Party who sought a return to a planned economy and to build consensus on expanding market-based economic reforms. It was intended to deliver the message, as described in a popular saying often misattributed to Deng himself, that ‘to get rich is glorious’ (zhifu guangrong 致富光荣). By most accounts, Xi Jinping undertook his trip with similar goals: to affirm his commitment to the further privatisation of public enterprise as well as to the continued role of foreign investment and market reform in the Chinese economy. He also emphasised the need to fight corruption within the Party.

On 11 July 2013, Xi visited Xibaipo, Hebei province, a place symbolising the Communist Party’s pre-1978 leftist ideals. Xibaipo was the final base of the Red Army before it occupied the former imperial capital Beijing in late 1948. It was also where Mao Zedong finalised the process of ‘land reform’ (the often violently enforced redistribution of land previously held by wealthy, or relatively wealthy landholders to the peasantry) by issuing his ‘Principles of Chinese Land Law’ (Zhongguo tudifa dagang 中国土地法大纲).

Rebuilt after flooding during construction of the Gangnan Reservoir (Gangnan shuiku 岗南水库), Xibaipo is now a ‘Red holy site’ (hongse shengdi 红色圣地), a popular destination for ‘Red tourism’ (hongse lüyou 红色旅游). Here, Xi gave a speech declaring ‘we must never allow the Party to change its essence nor allow the Red of our mountains and lakes to fade’ (shi womende dang yongyuan bu bianzhi, womende hongse jiangshan yongyuan bu bianse 使我们的党永远不变质、 我们的红色江山永远不变色).
Civilising China and Civilising the World

Since the late nineteenth century, efforts to create modern societies in East Asia have involved redefining ‘civilisation’ itself and imposing new ideas on old cultures. Of course, the project of ‘civilisation’ is not unique to the region. Worldwide, governments, businesses and educators have long tried to mould the economic, social and political behaviours of their citizens (or consumers, sometimes blending the two concepts). The Chinese Communist Party may be tireless in using the expression ‘civilisation’ within China to promote improved civic standards and limit dissent (perceived as harmful to society), but as the country becomes wealthier and more confident on the global stage, China also desires to be respected and accommodated as a major global force — and civilisation. In this, we hear echoes of the past.

zhidude longzili 把权力关进制度的笼子里 adding this to his Eight-point Code (Baxiang guiding 八项规定) of official conduct. To many this sounded like a formula for even greater amounts of red tape and bureaucracy. Although the anti-corruption push was a feature of Xi’s first year in power (and reached a high-water mark in late August 2013 with the trial of Bo Xilai, the Party Secretary of Chongqing and rising star until his ouster in March 2012), there was little indication from the new leader about how he might address the longstanding dilemma of one-party rule: in the absence of a free press, how effectively can a ruling party operating above the courts and parliament police itself? To date, Xi Jinping’s answer has been to reinvigorate the Party (and nation) through greater attention to ideology, instituting stricter controls on its members and emphasising its positive Maoist traditions related to social welfare and populist politics.

During the December 2012 meeting of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party, the body entrusted with guarding the operational purity of the Party, the official Han Henglin said that the Party should try harder to win public trust. For months party leaders and writers had been warning that overly rapid reform could hasten the collapse of the political status quo. Han referred to the nervous speculation that China was facing a crisis of political confidence. The official media reported on Han’s remarks:

‘A recent report shows that the public’s trust in the Party and the government has fallen to a critical level.’

Han said he had read The Old Regime and the Revolution, by Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59), a book recommended by commission secretary Wang Qishan. The book analyzes French society before the revolution of 1789.

‘The book showed that the revolution was caused by a collapse of public trust.’

South China International Materials City, Pinghu, Shenzhen.

Photo: Robert S. Donovan
foundation of the Qin-Han empire. By itself, *tianxia* was an abstract notion embodying the idea of a superior moral authority that guided behavior in a civilized world. The concept could be loosely applied to other universal systems of ideas, even those derived from secular philosophies or from various religions, for example Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. When secular, it could refer to recognized authority that has been legitimized to check and moderate state violence and political and military dominance. When applied to religion, it could highlight the underlying moral values behind acts of faith.

China’s growing wealth is having a profound impact on the world. This takes many forms, from large-scale investment in Africa and Latin America to the global reach of Chinese tourists, to the changing consumption patterns of wealthy Chinese who are becoming world leaders in the market for luxury goods, be they cars, clothes or speciality products. As Chinese consumers acquire global tastes, they will potentially fashion and change what those tastes are: a recent Australian documentary, *Red Obsession*, shows, for example, how increasing demand in China for Bordeaux wines is influencing the fate of the famous French wine-growing region. Just as the policies of the People’s Republic challenge the political and economic status quo of the post-WWII order, so do the actions of Chinese producers and consumers.

At home, the Chinese Communist Party describes its transformation of society in the language of Marxism–Leninism: a socialist values system, nationwide civilised city campaigns and the new socialist village movement that would transform the rural environment along urban lines. It also promotes usefully rejigged elements of China’s political, historical and cultural heritage. Internationally, it insists on global acceptance of its particular interpretation of China’s ancient culture as well as the historical narrative that the Communist Party rescued China from a political and economic decline that began in the nineteenth century and for which both Western and later Japanese imperialism must take a significant share of the responsibility. Both at home and abroad, its outlook is informed by a combination of insist-
Since the 1980s ... there have been two remarkable developments. There has been an avalanche of new books and essays to renew enthusiasm about Chinese culture and civilization. Underlying this stress on civilization is also an interest in the idea of tianxia. This is occurring in the midst of calls for a new patriotism that can be seen in efforts to arouse nationalist fervour. Some such calls are linked with the commitment to reunification with Taiwan, an echo of tianxia yitong [天下一统] but they are actually appeals to the modern idea of national sovereignty. However, there is more to that. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chinese scholars have been divided between those who have renewed their Marxist interest in the capitalist roots of empire and think that empire is now disguised as globalization, and those who reject narrow definitions of the nation-state and would like the Chinese multinational republic to re-discover the ideals of shared universal values in the idea of tianxia.

The government of the People's Republic of China reasonably believes that the norms and behaviours of the dominant economic powers should not be regarded as the sole global standard; it argues that those of emerging (or in its case re-emerging) nations like itself are equally important. Accommodating to (official) Chinese views, standards and interpretations, therefore, broadens and enriches the existing global order and challenges it at the same time.

The old order, as represented by such Western capitalist democracies as the US, Canada, the UK, Europe and Australia, may stand in awe of China's economic prowess. Yet state socialism and its authoritarian politics are anathema to its own concepts of civilisation. The Communist Party's ongoing efforts to redefine and refine Chinese civilisation, to promote wenming on the legitimacy of its one-party system, hybrid economic practices and the ethos of state-directed wealth creation.

Wang Gungwu points out the paradox at the heart of China's renewed interest in civilisation:

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The China Story Yearbook

The China Story Yearbook is a project initiated by the Australian Centre on China in the World (CfW) at The Australian National University (ANU). It is part of an enterprise aimed at understanding what we call The China Story (Zhongguode gushi 中国的故事), both as portrayed by official China and from various other perspectives. CfW is a Commonwealth Government–ANU initiative that was announced by then Australian Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP, in April 2010 on the occasion of the Seventieth George E. Morrison Lecture at ANU. The Centre was created to allow for a more holistic approach to the study of contemporary China — one that considers the forces, personalities and ideas at work in China when attempting to understand any major aspect of its sociopolitical or cultural reality. The Centre encourages such an approach by supporting humanities-led research that engages actively with the social sciences. The resulting admix has, we believe, both public policy relevance and value for the engaged public.

Most of the scholars and writers whose work features in Civilising China are members of or associated with CfW. They survey China’s regional posture, urban change, politics, social activism and law, economics, the Internet, cultural mores, history and thought. Their contributions cover the years 2012–2013, updated to September 2013; they offer an informed perspective on recent developments in China and what these may mean for the future. Civilising China provides a context for understanding the ongoing issues of modern China, issues that will resonate far beyond the year they describe.
The China Story Yearbook is produced in collaboration with the Danwei Media Group in Beijing, a research organisation that has been collecting and collating Internet and media information and on China for CIW and this project since 2010. The chapters are arranged thematically and they are interspersed with Information Windows that highlight particular words, issues, ideas, statistics, people and events. Forums, or ‘interstices’, provide discussions on relations between the polities on either side of the Taiwan Straits, on top ten lists and official Chinese views on China’s achievements, as well as issues of social, political and cultural interest. The list of People and Personalities and the Chronology at the end of the volume provide an easy reference for words, peoples and events featured in the body of the text. Footnotes and the CIW–Danwei Archive of source materials are available online at: thechinastory.org/yearbook/dossier/.

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