

Civilizational Clash in China-US Relations? Globalization and Culture Lines

David Scott

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At the start of 2019, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post ran an article on 20 January titled “From trade war to a clash of civilisations” written by Regina Ip. In it, she argued that “the West should recognise that China is not an ordinary national state. It is a civilizational state” and that “if Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilisations prognosis is anything to go by, Sinic civilisation is not one which lends itself easily to Western-style democratisation”. Having set up this civilizational contrast, she nevertheless immediately went on to advocate that “it is equally if not even more important in the long run, to avoid a clash of civilisations between China and the West”. Her status as chairwoman of the pro-Beijing New People’s Party was on show later on in the year amid the dramatic anti-extradition and pro-democracy demonstrations that swept across Hong Kong during spring and summer 2019. This was the focus of Gary Schmitt’s piece at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) on 13 June, entitled “Hong Kong: A clash of civilizations”; though Beijing’s line was to accuse US consulate staff, Julie Eadeh in particular, and the “West” in general of interference.

By then, two “very different approaches to the world” from the United States (US) and China had been on show in April and May 2019, which both reflected what Immanuel Wallerstein had first dubbed “geoculture as the underside of geopolitics” back in 1991.¹ First, on 29 April 2019 Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the State Department, was interviewed at the Future Security Forum on US-China

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relations being organized by the think tank New America. Skinner made strong comments on stage concerning civilization clash between the US and China, which quickly went viral and which ignited immediate responses from China at the highest level. Second, barely two weeks later and Beijing hosted the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations (CDAC), complete with welcoming speech from Xi Jinping on 15 May. Both events represent a quarter of a century of heated debate over the role of civilization in international politics, initiated with Samuel Huntington back in 1993, and which continue to reverberate in China-US relations.²

The “Clash of Civilizations” and Huntington

The American scholar Samuel Huntington attracted widespread attention, lasting fame, and a degree of notoriety with his Foreign Affairs article in Summer 1993 entitled “The clash of civilizations?”; complete with question mark at the end, and the famous prediction on page 25 that “the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future”. Rising friction between Islam and the West was most prominent in his analysis, but civilizational friction between China and the West was another

theme, magnified by his talk of a China-Islam block working against the West. This was further elaborated in his 1996 book entitled “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”. The question mark present in his 1993 article had disappeared but was now coupled in 1996 with a sense of a changing world order in which China was identified on page 83 as “the society most likely to challenge the West for global influence”. In Huntington’s book, China’s build-up of military capabilities were the dramatic scenario for a “civilizational war” between China and the US breaking out, in 2010, sparked by US intervention in the South China Seas in the wake of conflict between China and Vietnam. Of course 2010 has been and gone, but it is worth noting that by summer 2019 both the US and China had established greater military presence in the South China Sea (mostly claimed by China), complete with rising China-US and China-Vietnam maritime confrontations in these waters, at a time of strengthening US-Vietnam defence links.

Huntington’s analysis made a splash partly because it contrasted with other interpretations about the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1992, for instance, Francis Fukuyama in his book “The End of History” argued that the West’s blend of liberal democracy and

capitalism seemed victorious. Huntington's more pessimistic vision of the future rejected that idea, reflecting the collapse by then of Yugoslavia along ethnic and religious divides. Huntington's analysis of future structural challenges from China was also a challenge to assumptions of American primacy outlined in 1990 with Krauthammer's "unipolar moment" opening up for the US. It should be noted that most of the academic commentary was strongly negative to Huntington's analysis of civilizational clashes, but it should also be noted that Huntington's book became a bestseller. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 2001 al-Qaeda attack on the New York, which took down the Twin Towers and targeted the Pentagon, Huntington's perspective on civilizational frictions gained wider popularity, political pick-up, and perhaps credibility? A similar process followed the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East, North Africa and their blow-back attacks in Europe, where ISIS portrayed its actions in stark clash of civilization terms.

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Even though Huntington's analysis was most immediately focused on civilizational friction between the "West" and "Islam"; most Chinese commentators, official and semi-official, saw Huntington's theory as also providing a threat in turn to China. Wang Jisi and Zou Sicheng dismissed Huntington's analysis as dangerous politically-driven "China-Threat" policy-shaping. They argue firstly that "in a sense Huntington's thesis is more a political essay than an academic report, given that he has written it to advise the US government"; and secondly that "Huntington hopes his theory will line up the different fractions of American society, and even the whole West, to fight an imaginary enemy".³

A close look at Huntington's mapwork shows China straddling various civilizational "fault lines". Politics of course surrounds questions of culture and civilization within China. Beijing stresses the traditional civilizational picture of China based on the harmonious tripod of Confucianism and Daoism and Sinicized "Chinese" Buddhism. However, there is an edge to talk of Chinese culture and Chinese civilization that actually slides into Han supremacism. Han chauvinism (da hanzu zhuyi) was the warning given by Mao Zedong in 1953, and it remains a question over sixty years later.

Demography is of central importance in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC claims to be a multi-ethnic state made up of Han alongside a range of other ethnic groups; but the Han make up 91.5% of the population in the 2010 national census, and it is from the Han that Chinese civilisation developed. Demographic movement of the Han has been a deliberate PRC state policy. Already the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has long been transformed into a Han-populated setting around 80%. Now movement of Han settlers, denounced by the Dalai Lama as "demographic imperialism, increasingly threatens to make the Tibetan (and their Tibetan Buddhism) and Uighurs (and their Turkic Islam) a minority in their own supposedly nationalities-based Autonomous Regions of Tibet and





of Xinjiang.⁴ Sinification of these non-Han regions was on the base of this Han Chinese dominance, and presents an element of internal culture wars that were civilizational to some extent.⁵

Harmonious coexistence of civilizations

Faced with Huntington's clash scenario, the People's Republic of China has stressed its opposite – the harmonious coexistence of civilizations, achieved through the dialogue of civilizations. This ties into other harmony formulations used by the Chinese government, most notably "harmonious society" and "harmonious world". One should not forget that the political settings for the adoption of the phrase "harmonious society" (*hexie jiazhi*) is to shape a conducive internal

environment in China for continued regime survival by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This is matched by the phrase "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie*), and within that fostering of "harmonious civilizations" (*hexie wenming*) to shape a conducive external environment for China, that can also foster continued regime survival by the CCP.

Hu Jintao's speech at the United Nations on 15 September 2005 was suitably flowery and extended on such inter-civilizational dialogue. He started with the call that "we should do away with misgivings and estrangement existing between civilizations and make humanity more harmonious and our world more colorful". However more double-edged comments were present with his call that "in line with national conditions, we should enhance

inter-civilization dialogue, allowing cultures to complement one another through competition and comparison"; and with his call that "we should endeavor to preserve the diversity of civilizations in the spirit of equality and openness, make international relations more democratic and jointly build towards a harmonious world where all civilizations coexist and accommodate each other". Closer inspection shows some tension between Hu Jintao's call for civilizations to compete and for them to cooperate. Reflecting the political imperatives of regime survival, Hu's call for the "democratization of international relations" (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua*) was not matched by calls for internal democratization. The "in line with national conditions" was a pointer towards Chinese distinctiveness, the "with Chinese characteristics" (*juyou zhongguo tese*) qualifier

so often attached by Beijing to international norms like human rights, democracy and suchlike.

A series of Beijing Forums run during the 2000s pushed this Chinese message of civilizational dialogue. The First Beijing Forum, held in 2004, was centered on the theme of “The Harmony and Prosperity of Civilizations”. Its keynote speaker Qian Qichen, the PRC Vice Premier from 1998 to 2003, argued that “different civilizations should in the first place respect one another and coexist in harmony”, though in the longer term he judged that “only through the fusion of different cultures can international society and human civilizations make continuous progress”.⁶

Around the government, Tang Yijie has been a strong advocate of coexistence rather than clash.⁷ Partly this was a matter of history; “from a general perspective of history evolution, assimilation and mixture form the mainstream of civilization development in different states, nationalities and regions. In my opinion, civilization is not the root cause of conflicts between states, nationalities and regions, and different civilizations can co-exist and intermingle”. Partly it was a matter of policy; “I believe that the ‘clash of civilizations’ theory of Samuel P. Huntington is one-sided and serves US strategy”, but that “it is the ‘coexistence of civilizations’ that points the way out for the human society, a goal that must be strived for”.

Both Wang Jisi and Tang Yijie presented papers at the Beijing Forum held in November 2008.⁸ This was a high profile event, on the theme of “The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All—The Universal Value and the Development Trend of Civilization”. Wang Jisi argued there that “the role that China can and should play is to serve as a bridge between different civilizations and cultures that promotes harmony around the world”, but that “needless to say, while China is strengthening its cultural development at home, it wishes to enhance

its cultural influence abroad, or ‘soft power’”. Tang Yijie argued that “the deep-seated dream Huntington really cherishes is the renewal of the West to reconfirm its position as the leader whom other civilizations follow and imitate”, and “the performance of the Bush administration after ‘9.11’ incident can be regarded from this standpoint as an attempt to reconfirm American hegemonic leadership on other civilizations”.

The link between a stress on “diversity of civilizations” and foreign policy is not hidden. Jin Liangxiang has argued that “respecting the diversity of civilizations, as one characteristic of China’s foreign policy, is part of a strong Chinese tradition of inclusiveness, tolerance and harmony”, that “this approach had served to maintain China’s sound relations with countries of different cultural



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backgrounds, and particularly those in the Islamic world”, and that “this should be solid foundation for China to push forward Belt and Road construction jointly with Islamic countries, particularly in security cooperation”.⁹ Two significant aspects can be pinpointed. First is the “particularly those in the Islamic world”, which brings to mind the China-Islam linkage earlier suggested by Huntington. Second is that sense of civilizational dialogue being a “solid foundation” for China’s Belt and Road project. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is of course China’s flagship foreign policy initiative, the Eurasian overland route going through the Islamic states of Central Asia, and the Maritime Silk

Road going through the world’s biggest Muslim state Indonesia and across to the Middle East.

China has pushed closer links with Middle East under the umbrella of civilizational dialogue. This was evident in the then Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s clarion call speech “Respect diversity of civilizations” delivered at the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo on 7 November 2009. This was furthered in the launching of the China-Arab strategic partnership in 2010. China-Arab cooperation has become multi-faceted; not only in strengthening political coordination and economic cooperation, but also in the setting up of inter-civilization dialogues and cultural exchanges. The latter is reflected in the Conference on the Sino-Arabic Relations and the Dialogues of Civilizations between China and the Arabic World set up under the frame-





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work of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASC).

A similar process of geo-cultural and geopolitical nuances of civilization dialogue can be seen with the Athens Declaration on the Establishment of the Ancient Civilizations Forum on 24 April 2017 signed by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi with fellow ministers from Bolivia, Egypt, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Italy, and Peru. A swathe of modern positioning was contained with the Athens Declaration, where “recognising civilisation and cultural diplomacy as a soft and smart power, and as a major component of international relations”, they emphasised “the importance of using the dialogue among civilisations as a powerful tool of diplomacy” and that

“advancing the Belt and Road Initiative for international cooperation, among others, will play an important role to promote civilizational dialogues”

Xi Jinping has frequently brought in the clash of civilizations in his criticisms of the US. Back in 24 March 2014, the newly established Chinese leader visited the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and delivered a speech attacking the “clash of civilization” thesis. The speech was interspersed with traditional Chinese analogies, such as “copying other civilizations mechanically or blindly is like cutting one’s toes just to fit his shoes” and “radish or cabbage, each to his own delight”. His direct message was that “every civilization is unique. All achievements

of civilizations deserve our respect and must be treasured”, and that “if all civilizations can uphold inclusiveness, the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’ will be out of the question and the harmony of civilizations will become reality”. As always context is the key. One would not expect other than advocacy of mutual enrichment at the UNESCO setting, given this is UNESCO’s central mission. Typically Xi’s rhetoric was layered; Chinese civilization was unique, even though subject to exchanges and mutual learning. The copying of other civilizations was to be avoided, at least mechanically or blindly. Instead of the clash of civilizations, there could and should be a harmony of civilizations.

Four years on, and at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on 10 June 2018 Xi Jinping in a speech there that “in this global village of ours”, that “while we keep hearing such rhetoric as the clash

of civilizations or the superiority of one civilization over another, it is the diversity of civilizations that sustains human progress". The stress on diversity of civilisations is at one level a simple rebuff to notions of Western superiority. However, it is also another way of insulating China from universal norms, the "civilization with Chinese characteristics" in effect enabling the government to talk of "human rights with Chinese characteristics".

Chinese scholars like Yu Xintian were clear on the value of a stress on a distinctive Chinese civilization; where "Chinese diplomatic strategy and policy reflect, consciously or not, the influence of Chinese culture", able to use the sense that "China is a country of ancient civilization widely recognized in the world" to generate soft power advantages for China, in which "the kernel of soft power is culture".¹⁰

Globalization and civilization with regard to China's rise

There has long been a divergent pull over what China should identify itself with, "to learn from the ancestors or to borrow from the foreigners" (shi cong xianbei yu jie li wairan) as the traditional dichotomy has put it for over a century. This ongoing challenge is now entwined with the challenges ensuing from China's embrace of globalization since the 1990s.

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modes of thinking and cultural pattern. This has illustrated Deng Xiaoping's well known summation of the opening up programme that "when you open window both flies and air come in". A noticeable Chinese "culture fever" (wenhua re) has ensued over tradition vs. modernity, conservatism vs. radicalism, nationalism vs. globalism, and Sinification vs. Westernization.¹¹ The challenge for the PRC is how far Chinese culture will respond to wider global patterns, and indeed how far globalization reflects a tacit Westernization, and with it uncomfortable Western norms. To take one example, if greater individualism among Chinese youth is one consequence of globalization, as argued by Liu Changyuan and Wang Song, then this has potential economic and political consequences over time.¹²

Hence Liu Kang's talk of how "globalization constitutes a fundamental paradox in the sphere of culture"; on the one hand "the trend toward cultural homogenization through global cultural production and distribution (media, popular culture, and entertainment industry)" and on the other hand "the opposite trend toward cultural diversification in terms of local, ethnic, and national cultural projects and agendas".¹³ The opposite trend is in part the process of "glocalization", and in part more crudely cultural nationalism. The national cultural agenda taken by the PRC was one of reasserting Chinese culture, even while Western technology and economic ways of operation were taken in. The political agenda was regime survival, and the continuing leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).



Geo-cultural nationalism was at play in Zhang Xiabo and Song Qiang's 1996 collection *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* (i.e. "China Can Say No"); complete with contributions like "Burn down Hollywood", "I won't get on a Boeing 777" and "Prepare for war". Elsewhere, the editors explained bluntly that "a generation of Chinese has totally and uncritically absorbed Western, particularly American, values"; but "lately however, the tide has begun to turn. More and more people in China are looking East instead of West to find a future", where "because of the growth of the Chinese economy and the legacy of China's rich cultural traditions, many of us maintain that China should aspire to take its place as a world power, instead of lamely emulating Western society".¹⁴ Their attacks were maintained in their Chinese sequel, later that year in 1996, titled "China Can Still Say No".

Certainly there has been noticeable re-invocation of Chinese culture by the PRC. This was on show with the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games hosted by Beijing in 2008, and its panoramic portrayal of the glories of Chinese civilization. This has also been on show with the widespread deployment of Confucius Institutes throughout the world, pushing Chinese culture in the softest of settings, and run from the Ministry of Education.

Chinese scholars were keen to push this civilizational tool. In 2012, Yang Jiemian's call was for China "to promote inter-civilization dialogue and advocate the ideas of a harmonious world, on the basis of developing their own core values of civilizations", in order "to provide the new international system and international order with the wisdoms of the East".¹⁵ This national pride, and appropriation by the central government was encapsulated in Wang Yiwei's article simply titled "Revival of China's civilization gives legitimacy to its rise" that appeared in the *Global Times* on 15 January 2013.

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the PRC, as the government seeks to maintain regime control and project Chinese soft power and prestige more widely; "the concept of 'civilization' has long been a lens through which Chinese thinkers and PRC leaders make claims about China's global status and aspirations in the past, present, and future".¹⁶

The CCP Central Committee Resolution concerning "Some important questions in strengthening socialist spiritual civilization construction" passed on 10 October 1996 at the 14th Party Congress warned about geo-cultural challenges facing China; in which "what we must face the mutual agitation of all sorts of ideologies and cultures at the



global level”, since “opening up to the outside world may also bring dangers; capitalist decadence may seize the opportunity to come in” and where “the pressure from developed capitalist countries’ upper hand in science and technology and the infiltration of western ideology will remain for a long time”.

Hu Jintao’s Report to the 17th National Congress, on 25 October 2007, was a reaffirmation of economic reform but also of cultural retrenchment. Hu pledged to “promote Chinese culture and build the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation”, welcomed how “Chinese culture has been an un-failing driving force for the Chinese nation to keep its unity” and vowed to “enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide”.

Xi Jinping’s Report to the 19th National Congress, on 18 October 2017 was two-pronged in pledging economic reform but also cultural strength. He argued that internally “we should do more to foster a Chinese spirit, Chinese values, and Chi-

nese strength to provide a source of cultural and moral guidance for our people”, and that externally “China’s cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture have increased significantly”.

A clash of civilizations and Kiron Skinner

As already noted at the start, on 29 April 2019, Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the State Department, was interviewed on stage at the Future Security Forum held by the think tank New America. Her comments were reported by the Washington Examiner on 30 April as “State Department preparing for clash of civilizations with China”. Skinner did not mince her words on stage. Noteworthy was her pinpointing of civilizational factors in which she argued that “this is a fight with a really different civilization, and a different ideology, and the United States hasn’t had that before”. This was entwined with particularly forceful comments that “in China, we have an economic competitor, we have an ideological competitor, one that



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really does seek a kind of global reach that many of us didn't expect a couple of decades ago", and "I think it's also striking that it's the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian". The use of the term "Caucasian" was quickly picked up, and denounced by some as Yellow Peril racism. The irony on this is that Skinner is a prominent Afro-American.

US officials at the State Department were quizzed about her speech, and certainly did not disown it. Citing Skinner's comments; at a Special Briefing on 3 May, David Hale the Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the US State Department was asked "does the State Department view the current conflict with China as a clash of civilizations in the Samuel Huntington sense?". His response was that "I see China as a strategic competitor of the United

States. It's going to be a long-term competition" in which "we are at a difference with China, that we defend our interests and our values. And I do underscore values".

China's rebuttal to Skinner was immediate. On 5 May the Global Times opinion piece, entitled "US 'clash of civilizations' leads nowhere" pointed out the policy implications, that "it seems that the US Department of State led by Mike Pompeo is inciting hostility toward China as well as the Chinese civilization", and that "the plan mentioned by Skinner is clearly centred on Western civilization and discriminates against Chinese civilization".¹⁷ The following day, the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang told correspondents at his regular Press Conference on 6 May that "it is simply absurd and utterly unacceptable to look at China-U.S. relations from a clash-of-civilizations or even racist perspective, which deserves every harsh rebuke and resolute opposition". The Chinese state media remained strong in its criticisms during May, for example with articles like Zhong

Sheng's "'Clash of civilizations' theory will come to no good end" run in the People's Daily on 26 May 2019, and Li Zheng's "'Clash of civilizations' narrative dangerous" run in the China Daily on 27 May 2019. Skinner was denounced in Yu Jincui's piece entitled "Radical Western extremists threaten global security", run in the Global Times on 8 August 2019, but with the rebuttal that the West "should learn to face up to and adapt to the rise of non-Western civilizations"

Criticism in the US of Skinner was also noticeable, including from liberal critics of China. Minxin Pei argued that since "the latest failure to reach a trade deal suggests that the US-China cold war is escalating to the next stage", sooner or later "the Trump administration will realize that it actually needs the support of its allies to prevail against the Chinese", and "when that day comes, it would do well to abandon talk of civilizational conflict and racial rivalry, and instead offer a morally justifiable case for confronting China".¹⁸ However, in Hong Kong, under identity threat from ever closer embrace from Beijing, Chi Wang penned an article at the South China Morning Post on 11 May titled "Culture and race can't be ignored in US-China rivalry – American official Kiron Skinner is right". His position as a former head of the Chinese section of the US Library of Congress, and currently president of the US-China Policy Foundation, give his endorsement of Skinner's analysis an extra edge.

US officials maintained a robust position on "values" at stake between China and the US. On 12 July Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alluded to wider friction between the two countries in an interview with Sebastian Gorka of America First. Pompeo pinpointed friction as threefold, ranging from geopolitical (South China Sea), geo-economic (trade) and political (freedom) matters, where "China is a nation that has a set of values that are so deeply at odds with the American way that we think about the world and the very values that the United States

sets". On 16 July, John Bolton, the National Security Adviser spoke at the National Conservatism Conference in Washington, DC. Bolton argued that the growing rivalry between America and China "has elements of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations" thesis. The Chinese media immediately denounced both statements as reflecting that for the US "this is all about racial supremacy".¹⁹

The Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations

In the immediate aftermath of Skinner's comments, Beijing held a high profile Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations in mid-May. In the offing for several months, its timing enabled China to make an immediate counter-narrative to Skinner. The Conference also came just weeks after the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) held in Beijing and days after an escalation in the 10-month trade war between China and the United States. Throughout the Conference there was frequent reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) fostering economic and cultural cooperation across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

The Conference was welcomed by Xi Jinping, whose speech on 15 May was suitably entitled "Deepening exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations for an Asian community with a shared future". Xi set the context as "greater multipolarity, economic globalization and cultural diversity" and extolled Chinese foreign policy in which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific "has greatly expanded intercivilizational exchanges and mutual learning". In many ways this represented a Chinese appeal to Eastern civilizational solidarity, the pan-Asianism sentiments of the 20th century. Cultural projection was seen as bringing about political changes in the international system. The official news agency Xinhua was quick to run comments on 15 May by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations' (UN-

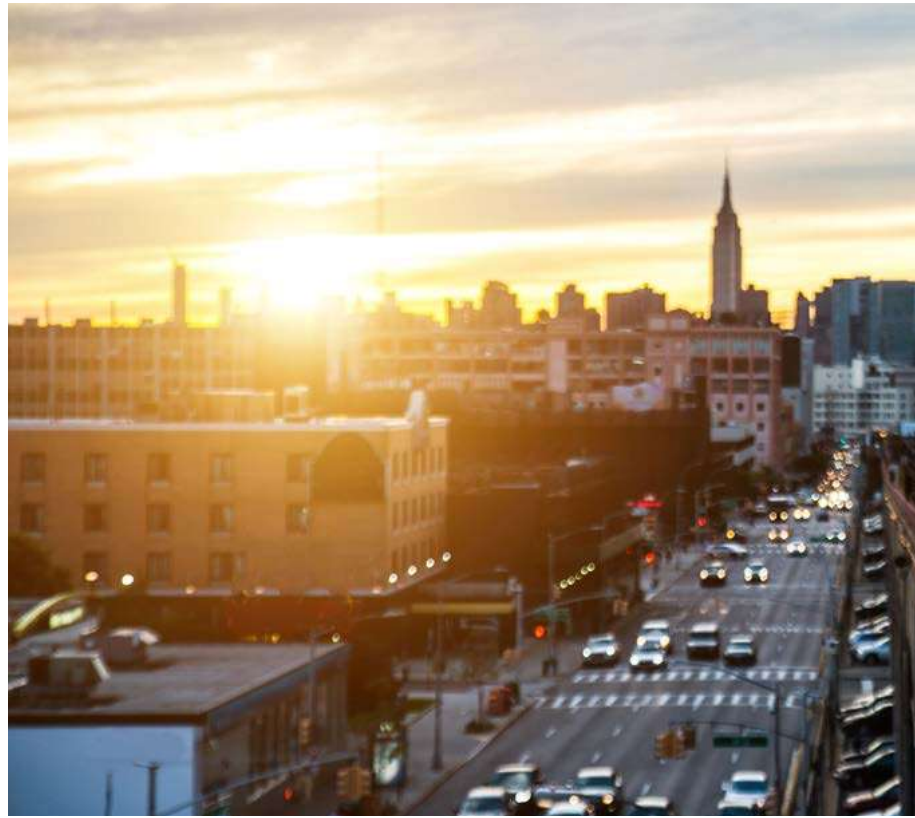
AOC) High Representative Miguel Moratinos that “the wisdom of the Chinese civilization is conducive to improving Asian governance”.

The conference certainly represented public diplomacy soft power success for China.²⁰ The final declaration, the 2019 Beijing Consensus of the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, concluded by praising China; “we highly appreciate China’s contribution to promoting dialogue among Asian civilizations and its excellent organization of this conference”. Its call that “the peoples of Asian countries should build strong confidence in their own civilizations and endeavor to achieve greater splendor in the future” represented an explicit Asian solidarity, as an implicit counterpoise against the US-West.

On 2 June 2019, the Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe went on the offensive at the Shangri La Dialogue. He asked his audience “which should we choose, mutual learning among civilizations or arrogance and prejudice?” His contrast was that “a few days ago, China successfully hosted the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations”; which reflected the Chinese position that “we believe that human civilizations are and should be colorful, equal, inclusive”, that “not a single civilization should be worshiped or belittled”, and the Chinese “cultural tradition that values peace and harmony”. Wei then turned his fire onto Skinner, that “unfortunately, some people recently pick up the decadent idea of ‘clash of civilizations’”, which he dismissed as “racist and narrow-minded”.

Whither the future

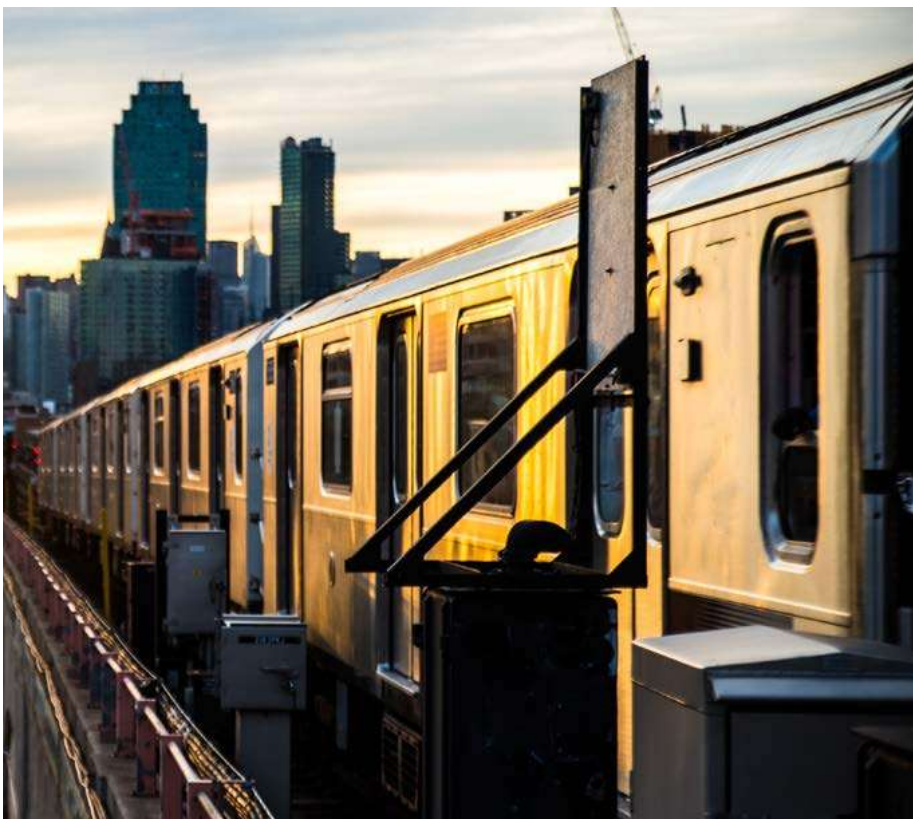
Ironies abound in this tangled field of civilization, culture and globalization. China’s current economic progress has been followed by a projection of Chinese culture, through the Confucius Institutes and other avenues of soft power allure; yet China remains extremely ambivalent about Western civi-



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lization. Xi Jinping after all sent his only child Xi Mingze to Harvard from 2010 to 2014 to study psychology and English.

Talk in the US of a clash of civilizations between the US and China is both a long-term and short-term process. In the short term, the current US talk of civilizational value divides between the US and China is part of a wider readiness of the Trump administration to push (back?) China geopolitically with regard to the South China Sea, wider Indo-Pacific and outer space, and geo-economically with regard to trade wars and rival infrastructure connectivity initiatives. Such stress on civilizational-values by the Trump administration has some domestic counterpart with Trump’s own Twitters in July 2019, widely denounced as racist, denouncing



non-white Democratic politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley as being un-American. The whole America First thrust of US policy not only cuts across economic multilateralism, but also perhaps fosters a degree of White nativism, and turning away from the vision of the US as a multicultural society?

Of course the Trump administration may be out of office by January 2021, or January 2025 if elected for a second term. Questions of multiculturalism will then be shaped and moulded within the US in the subsequent post-Trump decades. Questions of multi-culturalism in China will of course continue to be hammered out amid the highly politicized ongoing imperatives of regime survival by the Chinese Communist Party and longer-term questions whether Tibet and Xinjiang remain within Chinese control, and if so how far Han (i.e. “Chinese”) ethnicity will drive the direction of the Chinese state.

The present state, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is quite ready to push the theme of Dialogue of Civilizations and Harmony of Civilizations. This is very much state foreign policy by the PRC, and two important caveats should be made. Firstly such foreign policy civilizational initiatives do have soft power advantages for the PRC and have been integrated within other geo-economic/geopolitical schemes like the Belt and Road Initiative, and China-Arab strategic cooperation. Secondly, one might question whether civilizational dialogue and harmonization is something that can be engineered by a state. Civilization is something that is much bigger, more diffuse and driven by much longer time-span horizons than that able to be marshalled by a state, even one as determined to shape the future as the PRC.

Meanwhile globalization as an ongoing force will continue to affect China and the US, both economically and culturally. It remains to be seen how strong glocalization backlashes, economically and culturally, develop in both countries. Ultimately civilization remains a long-term process, within which social and political values grow, develop and change over time. Civilizations have always interacted, and in this globalized world of increased interaction, this may be a matter of clash at times. However, clash is not inherent per se; but what may be inherent at the moment is specific clash of political values between the US and the People’s Republic of China (the state), rather than between the US and China (the people, culture and civilization). The politics of civilization was perhaps the thrust of the Global Times on 1 August 2019, in an article entitled “Competition won’t even spare civilizations” – where Xu Li concluded in Huntingtonian terms that “the world is entering a new era of competition among civilizations” in which “competition among great powers will evolve into competition among major civilizations”, and where China would “undoubtedly build a regional order based on its own values”. ■

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