

Comparative Study of Western and Chinese Concepts of Civilization

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Recebido: 10 de setembro de 2023

Aprovado: 10 do outubro de 2023

DOI: 10.47661/afcl.v17i34.61954



KANAEV, Ilya; TING, Caroline Comparative Study of Western and Chinese Concepts of Civilization. Anais de Filosofia Clássica Vol. 17, N. 34, 2023. p. 1–16

ABSTRACT: The study revisits "civilization" in the context of globalization, analyzing its applicability and potential to mask cultural differences. It specifically contrasts the Western notion, anchored in citizenship and environmental mastery, with the ancient Chinese "wenming" that signifies enlightenment and social harmony. "Civilization" stresses progress of science and technology, along with the process of globalization. "Wenming" draws from the Book of Changes' principles, stressing the importance of ritual propriety and family over individualism, and "hé ér bù tóng" or "harmony without uniformity." This perspective promotes unity while respecting individuality. The research suggests that integrating ancient Chinese philosophy could enhance global cooperation by acknowledging the depth of cultural heritage and the importance of diverse societal values.

KEY-WORDS: Civilization; Culture; Human behavior; Values; Social cohesion

RESUMO: O estudo revisita a "civilização" no contexto da globalização, analisando sua aplicabilidade e potencial para mascarar diferenças culturais. Especificamente, contrapõe a noção ocidental, ancorada na cidadania e no domínio ambiental, com o antigo "wenming" chinês, que significa iluminação e harmonia social. "Civilização" enfatiza o progresso da ciência e da tecnologia, juntamente com o processo de globalização. "Wenming" baseia-se nos princípios do "Livro das Mudanças", enfatizando a importância da propriedade ritual e da família em detrimento do individualismo, e "hé ér bù tóng" ou "harmonia sem uniformidade". Essa perspectiva promove a unidade respeitando a individualidade. A pesquisa sugere que a integração da filosofia chinesa antiga poderia realçar a cooperação global ao reconhecer a profundidade da herança cultural e a importância de valores sociais diversos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Civilização; Cultura; Comportamento humano; Valores; Coesão social

Introduction

The contemporary global landscape, despite its oscillations in international dynamics, predominantly exhibits an inclination towards globalization. Nonetheless, the presumption that this trajectory can be encapsulated within a singular model is contentious. The present milieu sees various stakeholders vying to influence both regional and global frameworks of interaction. Crafting guidelines for these interactions becomes paramount, for an absence might culminate in discord, jeopardizing the collective accomplishments of human civilization.

Yet, how do we draft these guidelines or envision future trajectories when the pivotal actors stem from disparate principles and ethos? There was an erstwhile belief that by proffering the paradigm of Western civilization – from technological advancements to governance structures – a transformative effect would ripple through other cultures, leading them to assimilate these prescribed norms. However, recent political unfoldings unequivocally underline the stark differences that arise when individuals, underpinned by distinct core values, navigate the same scenario. Such disparities, if unacknowledged, can derail strategic endeavours, underscoring the imperative for a nuanced understanding of both shared human attributes and cultural divergences. Optimal progression necessitates discerning a universally accepted foundation while concurrently pinpointing the nuances that could potentially emerge as contentious touch-points.

Turning our attention to worldviews that potentially shape global dynamics, the paradigms of the Western and Chinese 'civilizations' come to the fore. Yet, does the term 'civilization' sufficiently encapsulate these entities, with their intricate sociocultural architectures, rich historical tapestries, behavioural proclivities, and more? While in English and certain Western languages, the semantic boundaries of

these terms might be malleable, can the same fluidity be attributed to other languages, specifically Chinese? Is the framing of 'civilization' as an overarching social identity intrinsically tethered to Western epistemology? Conversely, other cultures might resonate with a congruent concept but infuse it with divergent significances and sociocultural weightages. Such discrepancies might emerge as epicentres of misinterpretation, particularly when pivotal terminologies, such as "civilized society", are approached through divergent cultural prisms, leading to conflicting deductions. Thus, a meticulous dissection of linguistic constructs and their contextual underpinnings can potentially augment global communication, mitigating the risks of inadvertent confrontations borne from misaligned perspectives.

The Western Notion of "Civilization"

The term "civilization," as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to "the stage of human social and cultural development and organization considered the most advanced" (OEDa). This term finds its roots in the Latin word "civis," which translates to "citizen." In this context, a citizen is an individual with specific rights and duties linked to a designated state. Primary among the state's responsibilities to its citizens are protection from external threats and facilitation of interactions with other societal groups, thereby upholding the collective's interests. Moreover, being part of a civilization implies access to a rich reservoir of knowledge, technological advancements, and societal amenities, all of which augment individual prosperity.

Delving deeper into the historical lineage of the term, we can trace parallel ideas in other ancient cultures. For instance, in Ancient Greek, the term often equated with aspects of "civilization" is "πολιτεία" (*politeia*), which more directly translates to "citizenship" or "constitution" and pertains to the organization and functioning of the city-state, or "πόλις" (*polis*). This underscores the universality of the

concept, though its interpretations varied across cultures.

While one could theoretically delineate the "social" from the "cultural" facets of a group's evolution, in practice, these spheres are inextricably intertwined. Research suggests that inter-group migrations and exchanges play pivotal roles in safeguarding and propelling technological and knowledge-based advancements (Strassberg and Creanza, 2021). Consequently, one might conceptualize "civilization" as an aggregate of privileges an individual inherits by virtue of their association with a specific societal group. To partake in these privileges, individuals are often expected to adhere to the prescribed norms of that society, a prerequisite that mirrors the responsibilities of state citizenship. Through the lens of natural selection, those civilizations that strike an optimal balance between the benefits they offer and the obligations they demand tend to flourish. Over time, these thriving social structures amplify their influence, becoming predominant within specific regions. Historically, this has led to the rise of prominent civilizations, notably Western and Chinese, among others.

The underlying premise of "civilization" hinges on the progressive evolution of societal constructs, with dominance often equated to superior adaptation or "advanced" status (OEDa). Viewed from this vantage point, globalization could be perceived as a conduit for fostering a universally shared human civilization, assuming, of course, that the principles of natural selection underpin societal evolution. The term "civilization," as delineated by scholarly sources, is intricately linked with the concept of "culture." Culture is described as encompassing "the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a specific nation, people, or social group" (OEDb). Notably, while both terms converge on similar attributes, the definition of culture lacks the assertion of being at the "most advanced" stage of societal evolution present in that of civilization. This subtle distinction suggests that a specific culture does not inherently signify superiority or dominance over others. Even though cultures do engage in competitive dynamics,

such competition is not always the definitive criterion for evaluating them.

In the current global milieu, there is an accentuated emphasis on celebrating and preserving cultural diversity. Beyond ethical and aesthetic considerations, this focus on diversity holds evolutionary significance. By safeguarding varied behavioral patterns and sociocultural nuances, humanity equips itself with a repository of adaptive strategies, ready to be leveraged in the face of novel challenges. While a certain societal structure might exhibit optimal functionality in prevailing conditions, its efficacy might wane in altered circumstances, especially those brought about by human interventions or natural shifts. In this evolving narrative, one might postulate: do diverse "cultures" act as a reservoir of evolutionary contingencies, providing alternative trajectories for the continual progression of global human civilization?

The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy defines culture as "the totality of a group's way of life, encompassing their attitudes, values, beliefs, arts, sciences, modes of perception, and patterns of thinking and behavior. Although cultural attributes are learned, they often remain imperceptible to those embedded within them". (Blackburn, 2016, p. 86). How does this holistic "way of life" interface with the principles of natural selection and the survival of the fittest?

Examining prevalent species, it is evident that their modes of existence are sculpted by natural selection, acting primarily as reactions to environmental pressures. However, human existence is unique, as it encompasses not just biological responses but also complex constructs like values, beliefs, and intellectual creations. A notable explanation for these intricate human behaviors comes from Dawkins, who posits that the evolution of genes supersedes that of individuals (Dawkins, 2016). Essentially, the intricate human ways of life can be viewed as sophisticated extensions of genetic evolution. Yet, when a specific way of life is predominant within a substantial population, a hallmark of culture, it can manifest emergent characteristics. These emergent traits

might then influence individual adaptability, playing a pivotal role in steering the evolutionary trajectory of a population (Sidorova, et al., 2020). Social selection has been identified as a primary driver of human evolution, underlining its indelible impact on our evolutionary journey (Dunbar and Shultz, 2021). Given these considerations, one is compelled to ponder: do individual and collective survival stand as the zenith of human values?

According to fundamental biological principles, the instincts for self-preservation and reproduction are paramount drivers for organisms, which would suggest an apparent answer to the centrality of these instincts. While it is undeniable that, when directly stimulated, these instincts take precedence over others, human existence is not merely a series of survival and reproductive acts. The advent of culture has infused human life with activities that cannot be entirely attributed to these primary biological drives. Take, for example, the mysterious Neanderthal artifact depicting a humanoid with a lion's head (Balter, 2010). This creation, seen as one of the earliest symbols with deep meaning in human evolution, was likely crafted from fundamental emotions like fear, reverence, or sorrow. Yet, the significance and interpretations it accrues over time far surpass what its original creator might have envisioned. Similarly, while the primary motive of a scientific author may be to get published and a reader's aim might be to stay updated in their field, certain published works have ramifications that reverberate far beyond these simple intents, influencing lives on a broader scale. By nature, beliefs, arts, and sciences, which are cornerstones of human cultures, now mold our entire milieu. Thus, it is not enough to merely interrogate the values underpinning specific ways of life. Instead, the focus should be on understanding how these particular values sculpt both our natural and sociocultural landscapes.

Tian Chenshan critiques the widely-accepted global concept of civilization, suggesting that it engenders a disconnection between humans and their intrinsic nature, thereby eroding the sense of

community essential for the survival of our species (Tian, 2023).¹ Tian posits that this perspective stems from a deeply entrenched worldview that delineates the "individual" from the "collective", leading to an inherent metaphysical dualism. This philosophical underpinning can be historically attributed to thinkers such as Plato (c. 380 BC), who envisioned an ultimate "good" as the fountainhead of all knowledge,² and Aristotle, who proposed a transcendental origin for all worldly activities that remains unaffected by them.³ This paradigm found its apex in Christian theology, which venerates a transcendent God who conjures the universe from nothingness, acting as the prime mover and the purpose behind its existence. Such beliefs fortified the sanctified status of Christian morality, positioning it as an immutable truth beyond human challenge.

During the Enlightenment era, Western philosophy sought to emancipate itself from these doctrinal shackles, championing the ideal of the sovereign individual driven solely by innate desires, moderated by a rational assessment of costs and benefits in their interactions with peers. Yet, as Tian contends, this transition arguably perverted the essence of freedom. True freedom, in Tian's view, can only be conceptualized in relation to others, rather than as an inherent state of being. This paradigm shift has had profound repercussions: societies find themselves ensnared in rampant materialism and the idolatry of wealth, leading to a disproportionate concentration of power. Concurrently, science has veered away from its Enlightenment-era objective of human betterment, morphing instead into a dogmatic "scientism." At the heart of this transformation lies the "Dualism of One and Many," which posits the actor as a detached entity, superior to and distinct from the action, orchestrating events according to their volition.

¹ See the special edition on Classic Chinese Philosophy: *Anais de Filosofia Clássica* 33, 2023, p. 150-179.

² Those expressed in Plato's work, the "Republic," especially in Books VI and VII, Plato discusses the idea of the "Form of the Good" and its relationship to truth and knowledge (see Plato, 2003).

³ This concept is primarily discussed in Aristotle's work, "Metaphysics," especially in Book Lambda (A) (see Aristotle, 1999).

We argue that Tian Chenshan's analysis skillfully highlights a crucial characteristic of the Western worldview, a perspective increasingly supported by recent anthropological research. Significant evidence points to the intermingling of anatomically modern humans with Neanderthals (Callaway, 2021). At the same time, some studies suggest that symbolic realities and associated cultural practices, including funerary behaviors and mystical tendencies, might have had their origins among Neanderthals. Living in more challenging environments than anatomically modern humans, Neanderthals might have required complex cooperative behaviors, strategic planning, and advanced care for the injured (Tonelli, 2021, pp. 202–218). However, these environmental conditions, combined with increased individual adaptability and the related differences in brain structure and cognitive capacities, may have led Neanderthals to downplay the importance of maintaining social cohesion, resulting in reduced group density (Gregory, 2021; Pearce, et al., 2013). As a result, the European environment, fundamental to Western culture, intrinsically emphasized overcoming external challenges and promoting self-reliance—traits crucial for survival. Such a focus might explain the Western emphasis on analytical thinking and the deliberate shaping of one's environment, which has driven advancements in science and technology. Yet, this same focus could also be a root cause of many conflicts. Scholars like Tian Chenshan call for a reimagining of global trajectories, suggesting a move from the dualistic paradigm of "one and many" (一多二元) to the more integrative "inseparability of one and many" (一多不分), a principle reflected in the Chinese ethos. However, realizing such a transition demands deep understanding.

The Concept of "Wenming" in Chinese Thought

In modern Chinese lexicon, the term *wenming* 文明, often translated as "civilization," is delineated as "accumulated benefits

throughout human history that facilitate understanding and adaptation to the objective world, aligning with human intentions and gaining widespread acceptance" (BAa). Although this definition appears to resonate with Western scientific terminologies that permeated China in the 19th and 20th centuries, the earliest recorded juxtaposition of these two characters can be found in the Zhou Yi 周易 (the Book of Changes), a seminal text assembled during the tumultuous Warring States period (475–221 BCE) (Rutt, 2002, pp. 26–43). Within this text, the commentary on the hexagram *qian* 乾 (often interpreted as creative, active, or emanation) contains the phrase: *tianxia wenming* 天下文明 (Zhouyi, 2018). Rutt's translation renders this as "all under heaven is civilized" (Rutt, 2002, p. 437).

In classical Chinese literature, a singular character typically encapsulated a specific notion. The confluence of two characters in such a context was, thus, a significant semantic gesture. The character *wen* 文, historically denoting "character," "writing," or "literacy," has been identified on oracle bones, which served as an authoritative medium for divination during the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE). Scholars infer its archaic representation to be an emblematic human figure adorned with tattoos or paintings (Ma, 2014, p. 208). Such bodily modifications, often regarded as emblematic human endeavors imbued with symbolic significance, sought to demarcate the realm of humanity from the broader natural environment. This demarcation harks back to the employment of ochre in symbolic practices during the Paleolithic era (Balter, 2010). Given this context, *wen* 文 can be aptly conceptualized as denoting "symbols," emphasizing the profusion of symbolic representations as a distinctive trait of humanity. The counterpart character, *ming* 明, is rooted in ancient imagery, juxtaposing the sun and moon, symbolizing supreme luminosity (Ma, 2014, p. 165). Consequently, in archaic texts, *wenming* 文明 encapsulated the idea of enlightenment, elucidation, or the expansive dissemination of symbols,

writings, and knowledge. Thus, construing *wenming* 文明 as "civilizing" may be viewed as a nuanced alignment of age-old textual connotations with contemporary semantic frameworks.

The character *wen* 文 (symbol) is central for both concepts *wenming* 文明 and *wenhua* 文化 as it plays the critical role in theorizing "culture" and "civilization" in China. A definition of *wenhua* 文化 (culture) is "the systematic totality of all commonly recognized and used symbols (visual, auidial, and others), which are created by the unceasing process of self-awareness and-transformation, unceasing investigation, and modification of the natural environment" (BEb). The concept *wenming* 文明 (civilization) can be interpreted as illumination or brightening the culture symbols, their overwhelming emanation, which is coherent with the sense of "civilizing" all under the Heavens. This seems to be similar to the Western theory of civilization as the highest state of social and cultural development. However, there were significant differences.

The intricate dynamics between language and cultural semantics offer scholars a lens through which the shared human experience can be analyzed. A particularly compelling example of this relationship can be seen in the Chinese term "*wenming*" 文明 and its comparative etymology with the English word "character." Drawing parallels, the English term "character," with its Greek origin "χαρακτήρ" (*charaktēr*), initially signified "marking" or "engraving." This etymological trajectory aligns closely with that of *wen* 文. Both terms, starting from physical representations, evolved to capture deeper metaphorical meanings. The term "character" transitioned from representing physical inscriptions to signifying a person's moral and ethical compass. Similarly, *wen* 文, starting from literal scripts, morphed to signify cultural refinement and civilization.

Wenming, Social Cohesion, and Daoist Ideals: Interpreting Chinese Philosophical Constructs in a Contemporary Context

First and foremost, we aimed to underscore the importance of grasping Chinese notions in their authentic terms. Roger Ames posits that although translating Chinese concepts using Western terminology facilitated their introduction to Western audiences, it considerably altered their inherent meanings. Consequently, this led to the Chinese legacy being perceived as religious rather than philosophical. In the West, religious perspectives are tightly bound to a transcendent God that brings the world and its principles into existence from nothingness, as previously delineated by Tian Chenshan (2023).⁴ Yet, such a transcendent source of design is absent in Classical Chinese thought, which instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans within society (Ames, 2023).⁵

Ames gives considerable attention to the analysis of the concept of *li* 禮, which extends from "family *jia* 家 to "ancestor, ancestral temple, clan" *zong* 宗". This can also be correlated with "*li* 履, signifying 'treading a path', and therefore, the continuous narrative of one's conduct or behavior".⁶ We propose that these attributes can be framed in contemporary language as "social cohesion", a force that binds groups over time and space. "While we enact the *li* 禮 in the present, much of its potency originates from its connection to the past and, consequently, to the future." ⁷ This deep-rootedness suggests that all goals and values of an individual are shaped within the milieu of their life's narrative, rather than being spontaneously conjured from

⁴ *Op. cit.*

⁵ *Idem* pp. 1–28.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

nothingness.

Thus, we posit that the Chinese comprehension of *wenming* 文明 can be envisaged as striving for "social cohesion", using modern scientific terminology. A more apt Chinese reference might be the concept of 和而不同 (*he er bu tong*), which alludes to coherence while preserving the distinctness of each part, analogous to music: mere similar sounds produce resonance, not melody, which demands harmonized diversity.

However, the ideal of nurturing individuality in harmony with a society's collective vision is challenging. A worldview emphasizing social cohesion demonstrates remarkable resilience, evident in the previously mentioned definition (BEa). This resilience is palpable given that the Chinese civilization boasts the longest continuous historical lineage among existing ones. Yet, it often engenders self-perpetuating cycles of mutual recognition, like familial, clan, or local ties. By the mere definition of familial connections, individuals naturally gravitate towards the well-being of their kin. This predisposition can inadvertently foster nepotism, birthing a dynastic society where upward social mobility is stifled. In the absence of external challenges, such societies risk stagnation. Historically, China grappled with this issue, with the state examination system being a notable example. Presently, as one's social stature and power grow, the moral expectations placed upon them intensify, demanding a delicate balance between familial ties and requisite detachment.

A potential solution might be gleaned from Daoist tenets, particularly the ideals of *wu wei* 無為 (non-action) and *ziran* 自然 (self-so). Hans-Georg Moeller interprets tales from Zhuangzi, wherein individuals achieving pinnacle mastery in their craft "do not genuinely invest... they drastically detach from their endeavors" (Moeller, 2023).⁸ This culminates in a profound state of self-loss – *sang wo* 喪我. Here, one

⁸ *Idem*, pp. 42–52.

can be wholly integrated into their interaction with the natural world, becoming hyper-responsive to their immediate context. This responsiveness facilitates righteous action borne out of situational necessity rather than customary obligations. An official, unburdened by personal ties, can fulfill their role most effectively when untethered, even from those higher in the hierarchy. This detachment, paradoxically, ensures they remain contextually grounded.

Robin Wang highlights the ever-evolving nature of our world, epitomized in the revered Chinese classic – The Book of Changes *Zhou Yi* 周易: "The unpredictability of yinyang is termed *shen* (spirit, force, power). (陰陽不測之為神)" (Wang, 2023). This unpredictability is not mere ignorance but a quintessential trait of reality, teeming with countless entities possessing individual intent and creativity. Each act by each entity shapes the overarching narrative, where polarities invariably oscillate between phases, as symbolized in the *yinyang* emblem. Recognizing this constant flux ensures lasting stability, where "particles are in perpetual transition, yet the pattern endures". As Roger Ames articulates, "Creativity (*cheng* 誠) is self-realizing (*zicheng* 自成), and its path (*dao* 道) is self-propagating (*zidao* 自道)." (Ames, 2023).⁹ Thus, individuals not only achieve personal freedom but can also partake in the cosmic dance of creativity, a harmonious symphony between humanity and the cosmos.

Conclusion

A nuanced examination of the concepts of culture and civilization reveals profound distinctions between global worldviews. Western notions of civilization often underscore principles akin to natural selection and the "survival of the fittest." Such perspectives imply

⁹ *Op. cit.*

that dominant cultures will progressively eclipse others, culminating in a monolithic global culture and civilization. Conversely, the Chinese notion of *wenming* 文明 underscores social cohesion, epitomized by a majority's acknowledgment and embrace of diverse cultural practices. Within this framework, provided that a society maintains a robust internal structure, multiple cultures can not only coexist but also gain recognition and legitimacy within the overarching social fabric.

In the West, the bedrock principle appears to revolve around the Darwinian idea of the "survival of the fittest." This ethos promotes cultural convergence and advancement but might inadvertently foster coercive practices and biases, particularly in the absence of formidable challenges or rivals. In contrast, the quintessence of Chinese culture can be contemporarily termed as "social cohesion." Rooted in Chinese classics, the principle of 和而不同 – "harmony without uniformity" – champions the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures, fostering genuine inclusivity within society. However, this approach runs the risk of fostering insularity if there is a lapse in receptivity to evolving dynamics.

Both these cultural paradigms, with their respective strengths, stand as testaments to the indomitable human spirit. It is imperative that these rich legacies are both preserved and revered, ensuring they jointly illuminate the collective path forward for humanity.

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Funding: This research was partially funded by Carlos Chagas Filho Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ/ Pós-doutorado Nota 10), Grant number E-26/204.589/2021, registration number 2017.03356.6.