

FROM PROCESS OF CIVILIZATION TO POLICY OF CIVILIZATION: A HOLISTIC REVIEW OF THE CHINESE CONCEPT WENMING.

Wenming

Civilidad

Calidad

Higiene

Nacionalismo

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ABSTRACT

In the past decades, the Chinese government has popularized the concept of wenming, translated into English as civil, civility, civilization or culture, through its political and practical use in the public space: banners, pamphlets, advertisements and clips on how to behave as a proper citizen. This paper analyzes the epistemological implications of a concept that signifies beyond its own terms. Thus, taking a holistic perspective and employing historiographical, linguistic and ethnographic sources, the author links the current wenming policy to a structure of power reproduced throughout Chinese history, and endorsed by the state even during the most revolutionary periods. This structural inequality works as a normalizing apparatus that excludes the rural over the urban –class normalization–, the ethnical other over the Han majority –racial normalization– and the feminine over the masculine

–gender normalization. A process that has been marked by key historical milestones such as the emergence of Confucianism, Western imperialism, the birth of Chinese nationalism and the re-introduction of market economy in 1978. The author distinguishes this “process of civilization”, a sociogenetic, heterogeneous and multifocal phenomenon, from the concreteness of a political discourse conceptualized in the post-Mao era as a set of particular words and campaigns that the Chinese Communist Party has been shaping since the early 1980s. Therefore, the title of this paper From Process of Civilization to Policy of Civilization describes a transition from the abstract historical process –the wenming process– to the specific political campaigns of wenming –the wenming policy–, being the latter the reification and institutionalization of the ongoing normative process described above.

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas el gobierno chino ha popularizado enormemente el concepto de wenming, traducido como “civil, civilidad, civilización o cultura”, a través de su utilización política y práctica en el espacio público: anuncios, carteles, paneles animados y demás media donde se promociona la práctica del buen ciudadano. En este artículo se analizan las implicaciones epistemológicas de un concepto que va más allá de sus propios términos. Así, desde una perspectiva holística y empleando fuentes historiográficas, lingüísticas y etnográficas el autor vincula la actual política wenming a una estructura de relaciones de poder desigual que ha ido reproduciéndose a través de la historia, excluyendo lo rural frente a lo urbano –normalización de clase–, lo étnicamente diverso frente a la mayoría Han –normalización racial– y lo femenino frente a lo masculino –normalización de género. Un proceso marcado por hitos históricos como son la

aparición del confucianismo, el imperialismo occidental, el nacimiento del nacionalismo chino y la reintroducción de la economía de mercado en 1978, cuyas implicaciones sociológicas han perdurado incluso durante los periodos más revolucionarios. El autor distingue este “proceso civilizatorio”, sociogenético, heterogéneo y multifocal, de un fenómeno mucho más concreto conceptualizado a través de una serie de palabras y campañas que el Partido Comunista Chino ha estado produciendo desde la década de los ochenta. Así, el título del presente trabajo *From Process of Civilization to Policy of Civilization*, hace referencia a esta transición del proceso abstracto e histórico –el proceso wenming– a la concreción de una política wenming, siendo esta última la forma reificada e institucional de dicho proceso normativo.

INTRODUCTION

The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1987) described the “process of civilization” as a historical social phenomenon that derived in the pacification of bodies, that is, the moralization of bodily expressions and self-containment through ritualized actions, what today is commonly known as “manners, etiquette or courtesy”. If we look at how in present times the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is employing the term wenming 文明 translated into English as “civil, civility, civilization, civilized or culture” it is clear that a correlation can be made between

the Elias’ definition and the wenming political project. In this research, I try to deepen in the analysis of the concept of wenming as a historically formed ideology that has its roots in fundamental aspects of traditional thought and the emergence of national identity in China. We will look first at Confucianism as the earliest cultural and political frame from which the civilization paradigm was established. Second, we will emphasize on the importance of western colonialism in the definition of the civilizing center through categories of class and ethnicity. Third, we will take a

secondary concept as *weisheng* 卫生 “hygiene” to explain how the foregoing republican state promoted a gendered-based institutionalization of civility. Finally, we will link this procedural epistemological order with the CCP's current policy on civic behavior in the urban space, disclosing its consequences in form of social inequality. This theoretical outline follows a holistic approach that relies on historical, linguistic and ethnographic sources –in both Chinese and foreign languages–, as well as on the author's own work in Chinese urbanities.

1. THE CHINESE PROCESS OF CIVILIZATION IN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

There is a vast consensus among scholars on the fact that Chinese thought has been shaped by an ontological view of the world that is relational (some examples are Fei, 2009; Hwang, 2000; Page, 2012; Rosker, 2008). After the Qin unification in the third century BCE the “heaven's mandate” *tianming* 天命, a meritocratic and action-dependent form of governance, became the ideological template to legitimate the overthrow of one dynasty for another. The Han (206 BCE - 220) would later harvest this idiosyncratic soil to offer a coherent and unified system of thought: Confucianism.

The embracement of Confucian doctrine by the Han state was a method of justifying the sustentation of power beyond blood and kinship, formalizing a correspondence between social position and responsibility –action. In Confucianism meaning is only possible within a tautological relation to practice, Confucius frames it this way in his most famous statement: *junjun chenchen fufu zizi* 君君臣臣父父子子. To comprehend this sentence we have to take into account that in Chinese language –especially in classical Chinese– nouns also function as verbs: “the sovereign acts

as a sovereign, the minister acts as a minister, the father acts as a father and the son acts as a son” (Golden, 2010: 231). Here, we should not consider meaning as emptied by what “act as” it is supposed to signify in the vast domain of the common sense, but rather understand meaning as fragmented and specified through ritual practice –*li* 禮. For Confucius “behaving humanly is behaving ritually” (Cheng, 2002: 65). In this sense, the classic Book of Rites –*lij* 禮記– was the moral ground on which Confucian doctrine was established, a compendium of rites of social interaction full of instructions on how to behave in every context accordantly with one's position.

Altogether, we can say that Confucianism prioritizes relational context over general abstractions –as good or evil–, formalities over essences –e. g. inner feelings– and practice over discourse. A surprisingly secular socio-political system based on what Mary Douglas (2001) calls rituals of purity, the positive ordainment of reality to create a unity on experience that ensures predictability in an inherently conflictive social life.

1.1 THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONFUCIANISM AS A PROCESS OF CIVILIZATION

Following the sociological guidelines of Norbert Elias, we can conclude that with the emergence of Confucianism a civilizing process started in China at least a half millennia before the European Renaissance. The foremost obvious distinction between European and Chinese processes is that *wenming* 文明 has no etymological reference to the city, in contrast with the English *civilized* that derives from the Latin *civis*. In fact, the Chinese concept is a neologism created by the Japanese from the word *bunka* 文化 “culture”, introduced in China during the mid-nineteenth century

when the Japanese began to translate abundant European literature (Erbaugh, 2008).

The character wen 文—the semantic unity of the word—refers to a “person with clothes” or “decorations”, later understood as “literacy” or “written language and culture”¹. The political expert Thomas Boutonnet (2011) argues that the translation into Chinese of the English civilization term just added more layers of significance to the already polysemic word for culture wen. However, if we look at Norbert Elias’ analysis of the civilization apparatus during the eighteenth century Europe, we find a dispute between the Germanic conception of civility based on the cultivation of the spirit-intellect, and the French idea of civilization as the over-codification of daily life practices aiming to produce an embodied classification between the highborn and the Bourgeoisie. Neither of the two interpretations were new to Confucianism and both were already present in the term wen. From its origins, Chinese traditional thought conceived culture and behavior as one class-based totality.

On the other hand, the process of civilization in Europe remained mainly as an urban phenomenon. Confucian thought was also disseminated by the court but as a practical system of governance that affected all citizenry equally—including peasantry. The ruler had to act ritually as a ruler in order to continue with the exemplary chain of hierarchic order: “from the Son of Heaven down to ordinary people, all must consider the cultivation of the person as the root of everything” (Confucius cited in Fei et al, 1992: 74). The fact that we still translate in modern Chinese the words for courtesy, etiquette and manners in terms of ritual li 礼 (禮): limao 礼貌, lijie 礼节 or yi 仪 (儀),

another Confucian concept as in liyi 礼仪 or yishi 仪式, probes that the Chinese process of civilization cannot be disassociated from classical thought.

Another key feature of Confucianism is the way the dichotomy “inside” nei 内/ “outside” wai 外 renders. Only in recent times China has shifted from an agricultural mode of organization where the insider is strongly differentiated from the always-suspicious outsider, to an urban-centered society where these limits are more diffuse. As the notorious sociologist Fei Xiaotong remarks, agricultural society depends deeply on relations of familiarity that expand in concentric circles from a particular ego:

“The self is always at the center; so, like the motionless North Star, the self is always surrounded by others who come under the influence of the center. In this regard, Confucius is not like Jesus Christ. Jesus transcends human organizations. He has his Heaven; so he can sacrifice himself for the sake of Heaven, for something beyond human society. [...] Confucian ethics cannot be divorced from the idea of discrete centers fanning out into a weblike network” (Fei et al, 1992: 68).

Thus, the law of ritualized reciprocity is confined to the scope of these relations of familiarity—usually defined as the extended family—in opposition to the other that falls, if not outside, into the margins of morality.

“In Chinese rural society, there are special markets created for trading. The markets usually are located

1. For all etymological references the following online dictionaries were consulted: <http://ctext.org/>, <http://www.chineseetymology.org> and <http://www.zdic.net>

not in a village but in an open space. People from all over come to this special place and act, as they say, 'without human feelings' (wuqing). When they trade, people momentarily set aside their original relationships and settle all exchanges on the spot. I have often seen neighbors carrying goods to a market ten miles (li) away to exchange with each other and then walk the long distance back home again. Why can't they exchange at their front doors? Why should they make such a long trip to the market? The trip has its function. When standing at their own front doors, they are neighbors. But when they are in the market, they are 'strangers'. The act of settling accounts on the spot should occur only between strangers and should not involve other social relationships" (Ibid. 126-127).

With all, while Confucian civility was a much broader institution than the one restricted to the city, it is also true that a historical differentiation between rural and urban has imprinted the process of civilization. The historian Si-yen Fei argue –in opposition to Max Weber's despotic clause– that at least since the times of the Tang dynasty (617-907) Chinese urbanities developed more and more into independent and even contesting political centers. While the distinction was not grounded on the type of capital accumulation, cultural differences in terms of taste, style and educational status were very significant (Fei, 2009). It is important though, not to take Confucianism as a homogenous and everlasting system of thought that defines Chinese society as a whole. Instead, we should think of it as the hypostasis of certain traits that have endured within the Chinese social structure, with or without an explicit formulation of the doctrine. The sinologist Ann

Cheng (2002) makes this point when referring to the big popularity of Buddhism since the Tang period: "the success of Buddhism in his universalist project comes largely determined because of its autonomy respect a cultural and social order as the cast system in Hinduism or the clan bounds of Confucianism" (p. 358).

To recapitulate the arguments presented in this section; we have discussed Confucian thought as a genuine Chinese process of civilization that began at least in the third century BCE. We can draw parallels with the European process insofar as both represent a form of codifying social interaction through the way of rites –body containment–, education –culture– and social stratification –hierarchies. The main differences would be that Confucianism, as a much broader institution, transcends the dichotomy rural/urban and, at the same time, relies on a fundamental distinction between the inside, the extended family where the laws of reciprocity are very strict, and the outside –the anonymous stranger– towards whom these laws are not per se applied.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF ETHNIC NATIONALISM

Although China is one of the oldest states of the world, it is also one of the latest nations (Leibold, 2007). The birth of the Chinese state is frequently situated in the Qin unification; the powerful measures of standardization –scripture, coin, carriage wheels, etc. – that the emperor Qin Shi Huang promoted alongside with a strong and rational administration of the territory settled the basis for the most fundamental political and cultural conceptions of China (Gernet, 2005).

As we have seen with Confucianism, a constitutive part of this idea of the sinic world was the differentiation between the cultural center wen and the barbaric periphery ye 野. Since the very beginning the Chinese territory has been shaped by an enormous social and cultural heterogeneity. Yet, in an excellent work the historian James Leibold (2007) explains how during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the Manchu, considered by the ethnic Han as the barbaric periphery, reproduced the same imagery of an uninterrupted and unified culture of the Central Kingdom zhongguo 中国. He argues that even though the Manchu internally distinguished themselves from the Han, they externally exploited the same essentialized idea of Chineseness to evoke refinement and power towards the globalized world. This reification of an ethnic continuity would, as a result, become indispensable during the republican years to construct a national identity.

The aftermath of the Opium Wars (1839-1860) not only triggered a sense of generalized humiliation among the peoples of China, but also a need for rethinking the scientific and philosophical theories of the past. On this regard, the intellectual Liang Qichao was among the firsts to translate the Confucian principles of assimilating the barbaric world through the Chinese way of wen into new social Darwinist ideas that conceived races in different stages of evolution, Han being the most advanced one. In the near past, two big Muslim insurrections had already challenged the integrity of the Qing territory and when the last dynasty fell, Mongolians, Tibetans and Manchus would not wait to claim their own right to self-determination. As Leibold express it, “the ability to maintain peace along the frontier was the ultimate signifier of a government’s strength, authority, and majesty” (Ibid: 79).

2. During the occupation, Japanese were literally known as «devils» guizi 鬼子.

The first decades of the Republic were forged by gunpowder and the words of political debates. By this period, the most important epistemic frame of national identity was already established. The appearance of a big other – the colonizing forces– created the conditions of possibility for an internal big us, the zhonghua minzu 中华民族 or sinic race. From this point on, the relation towards the big other would become ambivalent, regarded as the origin of all evil² and at the same time a paradigm of progress. Initially the Han population blamed the Manchu for the defeats and humiliations China suffered since the 1830s but soon the xenophobic discourse was no longer efficient to justify the country’s underdevelopment. Hence, the Han intellectuals began to employ another classificatory axe situating the urban as synonymous of change and the rural as a symbol of temporal stagnation. The ideals of the Enlightenment were congruous with the historical avant-garde of Chinese urbanities that had witness the birth of several technologies of the modern world. In this manner, the Han reestablished their centrality in the civilizing mission by simultaneously unifying the different nations of the Qing geo-body against the foreign invader –the big other–, reimagining themselves as bearers of the sinic heritage of which its maximum expression was the Chinese city. In other words, the colonizing forces provoked the historical conditions from which the heterogeneous population of the Chinese geo-body recognized itself as a unity, or in Marx’s terms, as a class for itself. The urban-Han became the epistemological center of civilization in a scheme that was no longer binary –cultured vs barbaric– but graded in terms of economic stratification: “peasants” nongmin 农民 vs urban-born, and ethnicity: “ethnic minorities” shaominzu 少数民族 vs the Han majority.

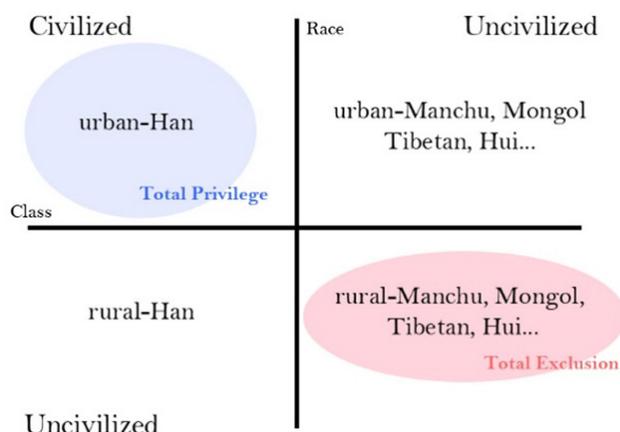


Figure 1.
Graph of national identity
(Source: Author)

2.1. NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE FEMININE BODY

At the advent of the new century, China was portrayed both locally and internationally as a sick nation. The translator and cultural analyst Sylvia Li-chun Lin (2004) shows in her study of commercial ads, magazines and other literary production of the Guo Mindang period (1912-1930) that “hygiene” weisheng 卫生 became an “institutionalized nationwide project” where women embodied simultaneously modernity, patriarchal values and nationalism in a direct relation between hygiene, reproduction and the nation (p. 223). As in the European case, the exploitation of women turned out to be inherent to the development of the nation-state. First, through the free reproductive work that women supplied inside the households. Second, through what Lévi-Strauss (1987) calls the effectiveness of symbols, that is to

say, woman’s health, hygiene and status became a symbolic placebo from which the nation-state measured its distance towards progress:

“Hygienic practice, be it the preservation of health, or the maintenance of cleanliness, is the overarching issue that highlights China’s backwardness and demeaned international status. We recall how Hu Binxia exhorted Chinese women to keep a clean household in order for China to be strong. [...] it is nevertheless clear that hygienic practice is the yardstick by which the middle-class measures its difference as well as its claim to modernity” (Lin, 2004: 219-220).

Indeed, the symbolic bound between women and hygiene was already present in traditional thought. A clear example is the Confucian female scholar Ban Zhao (1899) that considered this issue in her book “Lessons for Women” Nujie 女诫 (80 CE), where she asserts that a woman’s duty consists not only in showing deference and obedience toward husband and mother-in-law, but also to embody cleanness, purity and chastity through the cultivation of “appearances” rong 容.

As we have seen so far, nationalism was constructed under the myth of an ethnic unity, the great descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Blood and by extension hygiene and health were the essential instrument for the survival of the sinic race. In his project of returning China to its greatness, Sun Yat-Sen⁴ glanced an amalgamation of ethnicities promoting growth and mixture in a violent moment of

3. To understand the relation between gendered labor and the development of European modern nation-states and market economies see (Federici, 2017).

4. The first president of the Chinese Republic.

decreasing population (Leibold, 2007). From a political perspective, the weisheng discourse focused mainly on the relation between health and reproduction –woman and child– as embodiments of the nation; albeit grassroots level grievances also involved demands for cities free of garbage, free of feces, clean water, etc. Meantime, the Chinese elites capitalized this situation trying to distance themselves from “identification with peasants and their ‘lacks’” (Erbaugh, 2008: 640). Sun-Yat Sen himself criticized in a speech of 1924 the manners of the Chinese population and their “lack of personal hygiene” (Ibid). The president of the republic was echoing here a popular rhetoric in Europe since the 18th century. The claim made by medical experts and urban planners was that in the past humanity enjoyed better health directly associating industrial life and misery with sickness and pollution, altogether with the idea that morality and education were the only possible cure to the polluting effects of poverty (Larrea, 1997).

3. MAOISM: BETWEEN REVOLUTION AND REPRODUCTION

After the victory of the CCP at the civil war class struggle became the fundamental thrive for democracy. Mao Zedong charged against both Confucian conceptions of order and the bourgeois elitism associated with the West. From now then, ceremonial manners were seen as an obstacle to democracy: “Generals shall not beat soldiers and their stipend must be equitable, soldiers need to maintain gatherings and express freely their opinions, trivial courtesies [fansuo de lijie 烦琐的礼节] shall be abolished and the economy collectivized. Both the people and military institutions need to be democratized” (Mao, 1966: 501).

Certainly, the adoption of Marxism-Leninism as state’s ideology was an important shift in the Chinese civilizing paradigm; if in the past order was a matter of tradition and customs, now order would become equivalent of self-ordainment, an act of collective appropriation of the future. The victory of socialism represented a unique opportunity to revert the inequalities between urban and rural, men and women, the ethnic majority and the ethnical other. Between 1950 and 1958 important laws and economic changes were introduced to attack the problems of inequality: the Agrarian Reform (1950-1952), the Law of Marriage (1950) and the minban educational system were some of the most prominent examples. However, even though poverty was objectively reduced, the balance of power derived from the nationalist scheme was never truly challenged. The implementation of the hukou system in 1958 resulted de facto in the reification of the axes between the civilized and the uncivilized (see Figure 1). Inspired by Stalin’s *propiska*, an internal passport that bounded people to their native land, the hukou brought the urban/rural discrimination into new dimensions creating “on one hand, an urban class whose members have basic social welfare and full citizenship, and on the other, an underclass of peasants possessing neither” (Chan, 2012: 67).

The anthropologist Sara L. Friedman (2004) serves us with an ethnographic example of how during the Maoist period women –especially rural women– became, once more, the target of the civilizing apparatus. The author explains through the voices of Hui’an women –a cultural minority from South China– how during this period local cadres of rural areas banned the use of traditional hairstyles, dresses and other folk complements that were seen as “feudal vestiges”, incompatible with the ideals of the socialist revolution.

“Marxist-inspired evolutionary analysis, together with the writings and recollections of official reformers, defined “the Hui’an woman” as straddling the boundary between Han and non-Han, socialist and feudal, civilized and backward. [...] In other words, “the Hui’an woman” forced state reformers to acknowledge the powerful obstacles that they faced in striving to realize socialist civilization. As a potential (Han) socialist citizen, this figure did not reaffirm the boundaries of the civilized nation as much as she exposed its limits. Her embodied practices cloaked what was supposed to be familiar and understandable in unfamiliar garb, unsettling officials at various levels of the bureaucracy and inspiring intrusive and sometimes violent interventions in women’s bodies” (Friedman, 2004: 699-700).

To highlight the points made here; even if the Maoist period signified a calling into question of the traditional structures of power, the nation-state continued employing the same strategies of normalization of the past: intervening women’s bodies –the paradigm of proletarian woman–, prioritizing urban over rural – e. g. the disasters of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961)– and marginalizing ethnic minorities –the passive colonization of the territory. Friedman asserts that civilization as a normalizing apparatus has a clear continuity between the Maoist period and the present times. Hui’an women, she concludes, ended up imagining themselves employing the same ideas of progress as the state reproducing their own exclusion in a structure that calls “symbolic citizenship” in allusion to Pierre Bourdieu’s (2000) symbolic violence.

We would add to Friedman’s conclusions that this continuity can be traced all along Chinese history as a sociogenetic phenomenon –the process of civilization or wenming process–, shaping relations of power in a very particular way. Process that only in recent times has found a synthesis through explicit political campaigns and legislations.

“If you were the headscarf and go out dancing, then everyone will laugh at you” [voices one of Friedman’s informants]. [...]The figure of the young woman ‘who wears the headscarf’ was associated in village discourse with qualities of (sometimes excessive) modesty, close-mindedness, and the inability to understand how to be progressive or ‘open’ (kaifang)” (Friedman, 2004: 706).

4. THE REFORMS OF 1978: WENMING, THE POLITICAL CONCEPT

With Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, the reformist wing of the Party took over the leadership of the country. Deng Xiaoping pronounced then the emblematic phrase “to allow some get rich first” that summarizes states’ abandon of class struggle. Knowing the problematic nature of such a change, the market system was implemented gradually at the province level parallel to an active promotion of a new –old– creed, this time explicitly formulated in terms of wenming文明. That was the origin of the two civilizations campaign in the early 1980s. The plan was a solution to conciliate modernization with tradition, globalization with nationalism, associating the West with material progress and China with “spiritual civilization” jingshen wenming 精神文明 (Dydon, 2008). The return to Confucianism

was, for many reasons, a pragmatic political decision. First, as the past has repeatedly demonstrated, Confucian thought has been useful to promote harmony in contexts of social inequality. Second, Confucianism offers a Chinese uniqueness that strengthens national identity. Finally, Confucian family-based system was in part a solution to the problem of healthcare deriving again the reproductive work—previously assumed by the state—into the family core, or more particularly onto women (Zavoretti, 2010).

The idea of spiritual civilization was officially presented in the Twelve Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1986 (Ho, 2008). During this period, several campaigns for the promotion of civic behavior already circulated in the cities, most of the time led by public organizations such as the Women's Federation, the Chinese Ethical Society and the Ministries of Propaganda and Health. In the late nineties, the Party created a subdivision of the Central Propaganda Department called Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization administrating all campaigns and activities related with civility (Brady, 2009; Tomba, 2014). In 2012 the concept of wenming was included as one of the “core values and norms of Socialism” Shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan 社会主义核心价值观, the government's most ambitious ethical campaign since the Reforms of 1978 (Dai, 2015).

Today, wenming rhetoric can be found not only in governmental speeches, but also in the landscape of Chinese major urbanities. Cities are literally covered with banners, pamphlets, advertisements and clips on how to behave properly in the public space. These urban texts employ the esthetics of traditional language, frequently with

rhymes and ambiguous statements that recall Confucian quotes. While the uses of wenming may seem vague, a closer look to the public space reveals that the concept has different layers of concreteness deriving from place-specific situations. A clear example is the following announcement found in many public toilets of China: “use the toilet in a civilized way” wenming cesuo 文明厕所. Here the term seems to appeal to people's common sense without further defining what wenming is; nonetheless inside the restrooms we find allusions to specific practices such as: do not throw cigarettes in the toilets, do not spit, save paper, it is forbidden to squat on western-style toilets—zheji pandeng 禁止攀登—, do not throw garbage, etc. The list of these practical recommendations is broad, a set of hygienic, ecological and security directions that mix with purely moral precepts—do not dress in messy cloths, do not shout, do not speak foolishly, etc.—comprising a complex ideological system that seeks simultaneously for both functionality and classification. This is how a banner in the city of Nanjing in 2017 defined the term wenming.

“Wenming is a sign of progress, also an important characteristic of a Modern Nation. The proper condition for the construction of a modern nation and a socialist culture. It means face modernity, face globalization, the future, identity, Science and Culture, as well as popular socialism. The essential pillar to return China to its greatness.”⁵

Paradoxically, although nowadays wenming rhetoric and Confucian ethics are employed indistinctly as the

5. Campaign for the promotion of core values and norms of Socialism—shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan. District of Xuanwu, Nanjing city, 2017. Translated by the author.

same thing, addressing the totality of city dwellers through general rules of behavior, wenming ideology breaks with the ontological limits of familiarity in traditional thought. Thus, wenming as a political concept aims to establish a classificatory system based on abstract, independent of social position, categories of the good citizen never found in China before.

4.1 WENMING'S DARKEST SIDE: SUZHI

Parallel to the emergence of wenming as a political concept, another term gained presence in official discourse: “quality” suzhi 素质, probably the word that has aroused most attention among Social Scientists studying contemporary China. The first character su refers to something “raw, plain, uncolored”, the pictogram of a thread of raw silk hanging from a plant. The second character zhi regards to the “matter, substance” of things, two axes over a cowry shell. The word can be found in ancient texts as the *Guanzi* 管子 (475 BCE) or the *Zhoushu* 周书 (636 CE) (Xu et al., 2014).

Scholars coincide in pointing out that suzhi is an index from which people's quality or value is measured in terms of high or low degree –gao 高 or di 低– (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2006; Murphy, 2004; Tomba, 2014; Xu et al., 2014; Yan, 2003). The anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2006) argues that during the commencement of the twentieth century, due to the influence of Darwinism suzhi had the connotations of inborn characteristics, a meaning that slowly changed after the introduction of market economy. Rachel Murphy (2004) and Xu Liguó (2014) follow a similar view

arguing that suzhi refers to both innate and nurtured traits, as in “physical suzhi a mix of various factors, including heredity, intensity of training, diet and mental state, among other things” (p. 133). Contrarily, Ann Anagnost (2004) states that suzhi “is not something that naturally inheres in the body but is rather something that must be built into the body –a supplement that must be added to its ‘bare life’” (p. 193). As pointed out above, the literature dedicated to the concept of suzhi is abundant, a concept that has called the attention of many disciplines. Based on the arguments and historical facts exposed in this article our claim is that suzhi is nothing more than the direct consequence of the process of civilization, and ultimately of wenming as the contemporary synthesis of this process.

Suzhi was brought into official discourse through two specific policies: 1) Quality education suzhi jiaoyu 素质教育 and 2) the one-child policy dusheng zinu zhengce 独生子女政策. The first involved the standardization of the educational system in 1985, transforming the Maoist minban 民办 schools which purpose was to make-literate the highest number of children possible all around the country, into a model of curriculum homologation with mandatory periods “emphasizing creativity, civic responsibility and overall personal development” (Murphy, 2004: 6). The one-child policy of 1979 on the other hand, was the most important regulation on family planning since the Maoist period. The law was aimed at stabilizing the population's growth, making possible the material conditions for Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations⁶. Both policies inscribed into the broader narrative of changing China's model of development from quantity to quality: from rural to urban, from a low-end to a middle

6. Agriculture, industry, national defense, Science and Technology.

class nation. A transition that Anagnost (2004) insightfully describes as an extraction of value from the force of labor of rural migrants –quantitative material capital– into the now educated only-child –qualitative cultural capital– two constitutive parts of the same totality. If wenming is the system of daily life practices –rituals– that separate the civilized from the uncivilized bodies, as we have seen so far based on epistemic categories of ethnicity and class, we can say that suzhi is its direct consequence. So that, uncivilized practices produce low quality persons in a sort of karmic reaction that justifies the exploitation of certain bodies in benefit of others within a nationalistic logic of transforming the country into a modern, fairly-rich society.

“The laboring migrant body is the hidden source of wealth production in China’s economic “takeoff,” even as its lack of value is blamed for holding back China’s development. The discourse of suzhi therefore yields a surplus value not just in the economic realm but also in the realm of political representation. It works ideologically as a regime of representation through which subjects recognize their positions within the larger social order and thereby sets up the conditions for socioeconomic striving” (Anagnost, 2004: 193).

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, we have seen the multiple dimensions of a concept that transcends its own terms. Etymologically wenming barely has more than two centuries of existence. Epistemologically though, wenming as a moral, hygienic and pragmatic system of values is intimately intertwined

with Confucian doctrine and the historical milestones presented here –what we have called the wenming process. On this manner, this process of civilization characterizes by being multi-focal and rooted on the doxic reality of Chinese society. We have prompted some of the most important historical events that constitute this reality. 1) Confucianism as the hypostasis of traits that have persisted within the Chinese social structure, that is to say, a strong differentiation between the insider and the outsider –circles of familiarity–, an atavistic preference for the domain of culture –wen–, and a highly codified mode of social interaction in form of rites. 2) The traumatic confrontation with the imperial powers that made possible the appearance of an ethnic unity –based on a myth of cultural continuity, the sinic race. 3) An historical objectification of the feminine body as a force of free labor and as a symbol of hygienic identity –being Confucian or National identity.

When we apply to the analysis of these three events the variables of class and race, we learn that civilized is an epistemological category that ended up taking the urban-Han subject at its core in a layered scheme of power relations (see Figure 1), being the rural non-Han subject its total opposite. Gender, on the other side, is not per se an index that informs the distance between civilized and uncivilized, but rather an essential tool to intervene in the economic and symbolic fabric of society itself, in its modern form the nation-state. Moreover, we have seen that weisheng “hygiene” is another key concept that links both the wenming process and the modern wenming political discourse. Hygienic femininity offers a third-eye point of view –the national view– from which a sense of progress is quantified at the same time that, in a micro level, weisheng serves to identify rural poverty as polluting and potentially dangerous.

On the other hand, we have seen that so often the Maoist period has been associated with revolution and dramatic change, however in terms of the wenming process, said once again, as an epistemic frame of power relations, we argue that the real changes were few. Women's bodies continued to be at the center of ideological intervention this time through the ideal of proletarian woman. Ethnic diversity was marginalized through a slow but strong process of Han colonization, and urban-centrism was extremely accentuated with the introduction of the hukou system –an internal passport that legally confines people to their motherlands. Most important, we have argued that

this scheme of power relation persisted not only during the Maoist period but still until today.

Thus, the new dimension of the process of civilization is the policy of civilization, explicitly formulated after the introduction of market economy in 1978 through the concept of wenming. Since then, the CCP has promoted the wenming political project with two main purposes: 1) to cushion the transition from a model of quantity to a model of quality, from rural to urban, from classless to middle class society. In this sense, civility serves to downplay inequalities within Xi Jinping's national project of reviving "the magnificence of the ancient and glorious civilization"

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