

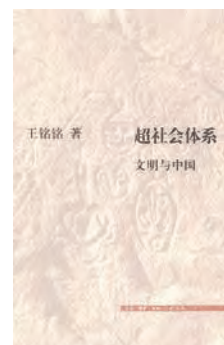
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Chaoshèhuì tǐxì: wénmíng yǔ Zhōngguó

超社会体系：文明与中国

(*The Supra-Societal Systems: Civilizations and China*),

Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2015.



Anthropologists generally prefer “culture” to “civilization” in analysis. Nevertheless, the focus on culture tends to leave out the alleged “culture-free” rational and scientific phenomena and to highlight instead the marginal, subversive, and alternative social phenomena. It has resulted in the inability of anthropology to deal with macro-phenomena except when they are taken as the frame for micro-local analysis, and to deal with nature unless it is culturalized. Professor Wang Mingming’s book, *The Supra-Societal Systems: Civilizations and China*, is an effort to reduce the asymmetries and partialities in anthropological knowledge production by revitalizing the concept of civilization for the ethnography on China and anthropology as a discipline. Both drawing on western scholarship and Chinese intellectual tradition, Wang Mingming rejuvenates the concepts of “*wenming* 文明 (civilization)” and “*Tianxia* 天下 (All-under-Heaven)” found from ancient Chinese texts to propose a more fluid conceptualization of civilization as the fusion of things and persons, as the hybridity between various cultural elements, and as the hierarchical coordination of self and other.

This book is an anthology of fifteen published journal articles, four of which have also been published in English. These articles vary in content but are consistent in their arguments. This consistency arises from Wang Mingming’s thoughtful reflections on the split between the ethnographic studies on East China (of Han Chinese society) and West China (of ethnic minorities), and that between Eurocentric anthropology and Chinese anthropology. According to Stephan Feuchtwang’s and Michael Rowlands’ interview with Wang Mingming (“Some Chinese Directions in Anthropology”)¹, Wang Mingming was trained in the British academia with a focus on Han Chinese society and later closely collaborated with leading Chinese anthropologists such as Fei Xiaotong in projects on Chinese ethnic minorities. As a sojourner between the East and the West in both senses, he has continuously worked to build the interconnectedness.

Retrieving the legacy of Marcel Mauss in establishing an intermediary concept between universalism and nationalism, Wang Mingming (“Society in Maussian Ethnology”) notices the significance of “civilizational analysis” in bridging the gaps. By referring to Chinese anthropological tradition such as Wu Wenzao’s discussion on “Nation and State (*minzu yu guojia*)” and Fei Xiaotong’s

¹ For the English version, see Feuchtwang, Rowlands & Wang Mingming, 2010, “Some Chinese Directions in Anthropology”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 83(4): 897-925.

analysis on the formation of “diversity under unification (*duoyuan yiti* 多元一体),” Wang Mingming redefines China as a civilizational polity with diverse ethnic configuration. This redefinition, Wang Mingming (“To Learn from the Ancestors or to Borrow from the Foreigners: China’s Self-identity as a Modern Civilization”²) argues, is theoretically and politically significant from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history. Ever since the 19th century, Chinese intellectuals have striven to purify the multi-ethnic empire to fit the frame of nation-state. With nation-state as the unit of analysis, anthropological concepts such as society and culture triggered the disciplinary split of anthropological study on China into two branches, Sinological anthropology (*Hanxue renleixue*) and ethnic minority studies (*Mingzuxue* 民族学). Wang Mingming (“Further Discussion on the Supra-Societal Systems”) contends that neither of them reflects Chinese society comprehensively, historically and contemporarily, because these concepts recognize the coevalness of cultures, but ignore the connection of cultures. Applying them to the Chinese society, researchers easily disregard the connection between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. As Wang Mingming further points out, concepts like culture and society were rooted in a fundamentalist belief in egalitarianism, and hence are inadequate to analyze hierarchically organized societies such as China. Wang Mingming thus proposes to re-examine Chinese society from the perspective of “civilization” instead of “nation-state.” It entails clarifying the concept of civilization, because in Chinese social science today it remains the same as the imported term from Japan in the nineteenth century. Its human-centric, individualistic and egalitarianist connotations alienate culture from nature, self from other, and modernity from tradition.

Wang Mingming considers civilization as one of the “supra-societal systems.” By defining civilization as a “supra-societal” instead of “trans-social” system, Wang Mingming emphasizes the vertical dimension of the hierarchical organization of the local worlds with the external and the transcendental. It seems like a Durkheimian approach to the social, but without ascribing the transcendent solely to the social. According to Wang Mingming, the transcendent can be the social, the natural and the supernatural beings. Wang Mingming enumerates the advantages of reconsidering civilization in anthropology (“Some Chinese Directions in Anthropology”). First, the concept of civilization stands as a reflection on the over-charged concepts of nation, society, and culture. In Wang Mingming’s opinion, although anthropologists have evoked “anarchy” and the “world system” to move beyond the limit of “nation” and “society,” the lack of analytical vocabulary further consolidates the national boundaries and thus new concepts are necessary. Second, the concept of civilization opens up a new perspective to study Chinese society. Existing ethnographies of China are examples of “village-peeping methodology” and of “presentism of social science,” which remove the local from the state and the history of China. The concept of civilization offers a possibility to connect the local (a village or an ethnic minority) to the state, history and nature, or the “empire of mountains and rivers.”³ It not only facilitates the analysis of a long-term view of the Chinese society, but it also enables researchers to see “inter-personal, inter-locale, inter-cultural, and supra-societal interactions.” Third,

² For the English version, see Wang Mingming, 2014, “To Learn from the Ancestors or to Borrow from the Foreigners: China’s Self-Identity as a Modern Civilization”, *Critique of Anthropology*, 34/4: 397-409.

³ *Jiangshan*, a Chinese political metaphor to refer to the state, the territory, and the reign.

the concept of civilization challenges the discipline of anthropology as a Foucauldian “human science.” A “human science,” centered on the “anthropos” in the world, tends to reject the fusion between human beings and their worlds. In contrast, civilization highlights the fusion of these categories; according to Wang Mingming, civilization is “an intellectual realm in Nature and the Transcendence of Nature, thus also a Culture of cultures, a system comprising systems, a level between humans and Heaven.” This appears as a descriptive definition of civilization. Indeed, it is difficult to grasp the fluidity of civilization with any definition, because civilization is constantly expanding. Nevertheless, compared to the concept of globalization, civilization extends with no agenda to homogenize the diversity of human experiences.

Wang Mingming (“Theory of Three Zones: another Worldview and another Social Science”) has devised the model of “Three Zones” (*sanquan* 三圈) to ground the civilizational analysis. According to the model, any ethnographic locale imagines, institutionalizes, and historicizes the world through “Three Zones” – the inner zone, the intermediary zone and the outer zone. The boundaries of the three zones are constantly adjusted and not congruent with their political borders. It is comparable to the three-zone model of the “Orbis” in *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*⁴ by Johannes Fabian, as it conceptualizes spatial and temporal distances and connections. In the case of China, the “inner zone” refers to the “cooked” Chinese cultural subjects; the “intermediary zone” includes the “half-cooked” peoples or the “ethnic minorities” with overlapping cultural influences, and the “outer zone” deals with the “raw” peoples and cultures. The ways in which the “Three Zones” and their relationships are arranged and managed take part in the formation of Chinese civilization. Any civilization could be studied with regard to its own “Three Zones.” For example, if the Nure are studied, the Nure-centric worldview and its universalistic value should be the premise for any theoretical elaboration. In this sense, Wang Mingming insists that the model of the “Three Zones” is emic-centric rather than Sinocentric. Wang Mingming’s model questions the legitimacy of forcing Eurocentric egalitarian worldview upon local societies.

Wang Mingming extends his criticism of the Eurocentric anthropology to “rationality,” one of the core values in European civilization. Wang Mingming points out that rationality tends to expel ambiguity. As a result, Eurocentric anthropology searches for and researches on “primitive society” as the dualistic other to modernity and rationality. It rules out the ambiguous traditional or archaic societies such as China and India those are situated between “modern” and “primitive.” Wang Mingming thus highly values the methodology of the Classicists like George Dumezil and Marcel Granet. Regarding Chinese anthropology, Wang Mingming proposes the study of the “Tibetan-Yi Corridor (*zangyi zoulang* 藏彝走廊),” a region in-between “order” and “chaos” (*zhiluan zhijian* 治乱之间). Wang Mingming also suggests revisiting the study of the “big men” (“Gentrymen, Texts, and the Great Unification”). “Big men” in Chinese can be translated as “*renwu* 人物 (person-thing),” an ambiguous being in-

⁴ Fabian, 1983, *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York, Columbia University Press.

between nature and culture, centre and periphery. It challenges the physical and anatomical view of person. Wang Mingming argues that *renwu* can be understood as the product of power structure and social relationships, but can also be seen as “life” transcending the boundaries of nation, state, society, culture, and nature. This is a complement to European anthropology, because, as Wang Mingming suggests (“Epilogue to *The West as the Other: A Genealogy of Chinese Occidentalism*”), European anthropology to some degree is based on “the philosophy of death.” It sees the world as structure and person as individual. Wang Mingming believes that a Chinese “philosophy of life,” with an emphasis on change, activates conceptual fluidity, fuzziness, and interconnectedness. It overcomes the dichotomies of person and thing, culture and nature, experience and mentality, as well as self and other in anthropological theories. Furthermore, Wang Mingming (“Overseas Ethnography”) advocates the normally “homebound” Chinese anthropologists to conduct ethnography worldwide so as to better participate in knowledge production. Wang Mingming’s advocacy is not out of the Sinocentric complex, but the recognition of non-European knowledge as universalistic knowledge.

Different from other grand concepts like “capital” or “*Herrschaft*,” which assume the “sin” of human society and power, the concept of civilization cherishes hierarchy and sharing-ness among the social, the natural, and the supernatural worlds, in line with the discussions on gift, sacrifice, and “*homo hierarchicus*.” Challenges to Wang Mingming’s argument definitely arise as inequality and violence are still the central character of the current global world. Is civilizational analysis a eulogy of the power-asymmetry of different societies and actors, and an embellishment to the process of imperialism as a result of “shared” institutions?

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