

Who Understands Civilization — Xi's CPC or Working People?

By Charles Andrews

Xi Jinping, chairman of the Communist Party of China (CPC), asks, “Without the 5,000-year-long Chinese civilization, how could we have Chinese characteristics?”¹ When Donald Trump visited Beijing in 2017, Xi told him, “The only continuous civilization to continue onwards is China.”²

Party publicists rush in with stories of research on the longest uninterrupted civilization, generally claiming 5,000 years, that is, from 3000 BC. Xi makes publicized visits to cultural archives and gives speeches about it. “President Xi Jinping underscored efforts to carry forward the Chinese civilization, the only uninterrupted civilization in the world ... at a high-profile meeting on cultural inheritance and development.”³

What is the class essence of civilization? That is how to judge whether Xi Jinping and the CPC want to enlighten the working people of China or fool them.

Our positive feeling about civilization

“Civilization” carries a positive feeling in general conversation. Webster's Second Unabridged Dictionary defines it as “A state of social culture characterized by relative progress in the arts, science, and statecraft; also, the progressive development of these and of the means of expressing the aspirations of the human spirit, as in art or religion.”

Most of us have affection for certain music, movies, art, and literature, and we recognize what science enables us to do. Some people find the sense of things in one or another philosophical outlook, others in a religion. We know what deeds are noble and when we have fallen short.

For all that, the dominant class is the major celebrator of a civilization. Governments and well-to-do patrons construct monuments to their civilization. The nineteenth-century British imperialists took open pride that they pushed their civilization on India and on colonies in Africa and Asia. “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”⁴

When chairman Xi Jinping and the CPC hail the thousands of years of uninterrupted Chinese civilization, something about its class character warms their hearts.

Three elements of uninterrupted Chinese civilization

The Chinese civilization at issue had three distinctive elements: its ideographic writing, Confucian ideology, and the mandarin state.

* **Ideographic writing.** Some form of writing is usually included as a requirement of civilization.⁵ All early civilizations collect and disburse enough surplus product that they need to keep accounts of it. Writing evolves from the signs that record how much of what was taken from whom.

A Chinese text of 1000 ideographic characters translates on average into 600 to 700 English words.⁶ The first documents of ancient China that we can decipher are written in an oracle bone script. It dates from 1500 BC and developed into modern Chinese writing.⁷

The earliest known writing done with phonetic marks instead of ideographs is a Phoenician alphabet of 30 letters, dating from 1700 BC. One region of the world after another changed over to phonetic writing – except China.⁸

To become literate in Chinese, you must learn several hundred characters; most Chinese people today recognize three to five thousand characters. It is obviously much easier if you can learn a few dozen letters and are then equipped to sound out words that you already know in daily speech.

Mandarins took pride in calligraphy done with brush and ink. It combines meaning and artistry into a unique aesthetic achievement. There was a “small price” paid for their delight. Ideographic writing helped exclude the peasants from literacy for almost 3,500 years.

* **Confucian ideology.** Xi Jinping said: “The fine elements of traditional Chinese philosophies, including Confucianism, have contributed tremendously to the cultivation of the Chinese civilization and its uninterrupted continuation in the past thousands of years ...”⁹

Confucian ideology was an instrument of exploiting class rule. Its core is said to be five virtues and three “guides.” The former are vague abstractions: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and integrity. The three guides are more direct:

The prince is the “guide” of his ministers, the father is the “guide” of his sons, and the husband is the “guide” of his wife.¹⁰

The last of these commandments expands into three more strictures for women: obey your father before marriage; then obey your husband; and obey your sons in widowhood.¹¹ These guides fuse submission to the state with the patriarchal family.

Confucius lived, so far as we know, from 551 BC to 479 BC. During the next several centuries political ideologists adapted his philosophy. Triumph arrived when emperor Wudi (141 BC to 87 BC) of the Han dynasty decreed that Confucian writings were state doctrine.¹² Confucianism served in place of a religion, but without a separate power center, without a bible of mythical stories, and without the expense of an organized Church.

Every ruling class pushes a set of values and rules of behavior onto the working people. They command obedience to the powers that be, teach that rebellion is futile, and offer consolation for a life of endless labor and impoverishment. The Confucian guides were pumped deep into the minds of the peasants and, despite their uprisings, remained the ideological pillar for the entire span of uninterrupted Chinese civilization.

Confucian ideology also became the conceptual framework required of state officials.

* **The mandarin-gentry state.** Like most of the ancient world, in China at the time of Confucius someone obtained office because he inherited it, because a king or superior official appointed him, or because he was a military man who fought his way in. That changed when the regime required that prospective officials pass written exams testing detailed knowledge of The Five Classics, The Four Books, and the rest of the Confucian canon, plus a body of commentaries. The higher the post, the more difficult the exam.

It took ten to twenty years to prepare for the examinations. A landlord family could support a son while he went through the regimen, paying for his books, tutors, and fees at preparatory schools. If the son won a government post, he would extract a fortune in bribes and other gains for himself and his family.

Peasants had virtually no opportunity to become a state official. The study could not be done for an hour by candle after a hard day in the field, nor could the family afford the books. Besides, nearly all peasants were illiterate. Very rarely, a rich peasant family might propel a son into the mandarin.

Examinations began in the Han dynasty. They became more systematic in the Sui dynasty (581 AD to 618 AD), but it was in the eleventh century that examinations served as *the* channel for upward mobility into the state.¹³ Administration of the exams had its ups and downs; at times, a gentry family might get their son in through the back door. The government claimed that it chose qualified persons through a fair and meritocratic selection. That was code for loyalty to the imperial state.

Around 2,200 years of Confucian rule

Continuous Chinese civilization cannot be dated from the development of ideographic writing around 3,500 years ago. Still to come was the victory of Confucianism as the prevailing ideology. Nor can the uninterrupted civilization be dated from the life of Confucius. The state was still an aristocracy, not a mandarin regime.

At best, the civilization arose around 2,200 years ago, although it took another 800 years to become entrenched. This fundamentally static civilization prevailed to the end of the last dynasty, the Qing, when the edifice of imperial rule was overthrown in 1911.

The material base of Confucian civilization: exploitation of peasants

A landlord-peasant mode of production had begun well before Confucius. Peasants worked the land. Working peasants handed over as much as half the crop to a landlord, who was one of the local gentry or the imperial state.

Peasants were also compelled to perform unpaid labor on gentry estates.¹⁴ If a peasant family managed to buy a little plot of land outright, it paid taxes. And farmers had to do construction work for the imperial regime, like the Great Wall.

The peasants' standard of living remained in a narrow range from subsistence to slightly above it, with regional variations. "From 108 BC to 1911 AD, 1,828 famines were recorded."¹⁵ They were not purely natural events, a drought or flood. The landlords still demanded their rent. The imperial state was supposed to maintain canals and dykes, as well as store grain reserves for release during famine. It often failed to do so.

Consequently, uninterrupted Confucian civilization includes an unending series of peasant revolts. "From 210 BC to 1900 AD there were in all 2,106 major peasant rebellions in China, each on average lasting for seven years with 226,000 participants."¹⁶ This astounding roll of insurrections is an indictment of the exploitation on which the landed gentry, the mandarins, and their civilization rested.

Technical progress within the confines of agrarian exploitation

A mode of production orchestrates *forces of production* within *relations of production*. The forces are the methods, tools, machinery, and human skills applied to nature. Production also requires relations among people; no one produces all by himself. Repeating a process of labor over and over, working people see new ways of doing things. Sooner or later they are tested, and some are more productive.

During the span of Confucian civilization, food output multiplied several times. More effective ways of growing rice were found. Peasants keep each small plot level so it can be flooded and drained as best suits the seedlings. They start seedlings in manured land then transplant them to the main field, taking care to cull the sickly ones. The government sponsored research to find varieties of rice that matured faster and yielded more, then dispatched agents with starter seeds.¹⁷

In the northern areas where rice does not grow, wheat replaced millet as the main crop. Peasants adopted the seed drill, with requires care and skill to

use. The drill plants seeds at uniform depth and covers them with soil. The yield per acre multiplies over what is achieved by scattering seeds as European peasants did at the same time in history.

Peasants created farming land. They colonized new territory, and they terraced hillsides and pumped water up to them. They blocked erosion by judicious planting of trees.¹⁸

New crops were brought into China: Champa rice from Vietnam, and corn and potatoes after direct or indirect contact with South America. Cotton replaced hemp as the cloth of peasant garments. (Silk remained a luxury, and at times the imperial state forbade common people to wear silk, the cloth that soothed the tender skin of the upper classes.)

While such techniques wrested more product from each hectare of land, they also *increased* the peasants' toil per hectare. Transplanting rice took another round of labor. The seed drill required more time to plant a hectare than scattering. Peasants leveled fields with hand tools. Peasant colonists did the hard work of digging out rocks and preparing soil for cultivation.

Food and fiber output increased during the time of Confucian civilization. So did population. Sometimes the peasant standard of living improved, modestly at best. Most remained tenant farmers exploited to the maximum. Ninety percent of the population were peasants at the beginning of Confucian civilization. Eighty percent were peasants at its end. The largest percentage of people who were not peasants was about 25 percent in the eleventh century.¹⁹

A deliberately static civilization

Technical progress does not always move a society forward. Nor does it guarantee that people's lives will improve. The incessant uprisings by peasants testify that little changed for them.

Yet the peasants did not envision a new society. Sometimes the rebels demanded a return to "true" Confucian ways, while in other uprisings they recalled the dim past when the community of tillers kept all the bounty of the land.²⁰ Millennia of landlord exploitation were ground into dust only

when communism came to China and the group led by Mao Zedong transformed peasant rebellion into people's war.

Confucian mandarins were alert to anything that could undermine the landlord-peasant mode of exploitation. Joseph Needham summarized a lifetime of study: "Capital accumulation there could indeed be, but the application of it in permanently productive industrial enterprises was constantly inhibited by the scholar-bureaucrats, as indeed was any other social action which might threaten their supremacy."²¹

In the eleventh century, commodity exchange expanded substantially. The peasant sector contracted to about 75 percent of the population, while the number of merchants, financiers, independent craftsmen and even a few clusters of workshops employing proletarians grew. This commerce did not create a proletariat, a class with nothing to sell but their labor power, and a vigorous capitalist class to employ them. Much of the work was parceled out to peasant households. The employers were merchants, who have never been a motor of capitalism. A prosperous merchant typically consolidated his social position by buying land and knocking on the door of the gentry. All in all, there was no threat of all-round capitalism. In feudal England, an outlier in the broad area of European civilization, the rule of king and nobles was not strong enough to maintain the subjugation of the serfs in villages around lords' estates. The Confucian empire was much tougher.

Nonetheless, the imperial mandarins did not welcome unchecked commercial activity. One of them, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), undertook a massive overhaul of the Confucian canon, which is today called neo-Confucianism. He recognized that the Confucian chain of obedience reinforced landlord exploitation of the peasants. He wrote:

In order to control the minds of the people, unify one's kin, and enrich social customs so that people will not forget their origin, it is necessary to clarify genealogy, group members of the clan together, and institute a system of heads of descent. ... If the system of heads of descent were destroyed, people would not know their origin. The results would be that they would drift and wander in all directions.²²

Who honors this reactionary theoretician of gentry-mandarin oppression? CPC chairman Xi Jinping! In July 2023, he made a publicized visit to a park dedicated to Zhu Xi!²³ Moreover, “Xi Jinping was the first leader of the CPC to deliver a speech in remembrance of Confucius ... Xi Jinping’s administration makes it compulsory for the senior government officials to take lectures regarding Confucianism.”²⁴

The beginning of civilizations

Human society has gone through three stages: hunter-gatherer, a tribal agriculturalist stage, and civilization. Using stone tools, we originally got our food by foraging, hunting and perhaps fishing. Toward the end of this stage, we also engaged in incidental gardening of vegetables.

From around ten thousand years ago we discovered, developed, and made our principal occupation farming the land. At first, agriculturists continued primitive communism – a share and share alike of what the group produced. It was the only way to survive. Agriculture, though, yields grain, meat, and fiber well beyond what foragers and hunters had. For a long time the enlarged product still belonged to the community. Some was stored to get through crop failures. This phase demonstrates that human nature is *not* basically selfish. It is not “in our genes,” as the anti-historical phrase goes.

Agriculturalists also continued the tribal form of society. Tribes developed military leaders and medicine men. At first, they did farm work like everyone else. As time went on, they obtained privileges. Eventually, they extracted extra food, separate housing, and exemption from working the land. Classes and exploitation emerged.

The occasional non-farming craftsman developed. The person who turned copper and tin ores into bronze tools, weapons, and jewelry might be supported without doing farm work. But this division of labor was limited.

The great archaeologist V. Gordon Childe explained that civilization began with the *city*. “...in the alluvial valleys of the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates, and the Indus about five thousand years ago Society persuaded or compelled the farmers to produce a surplus of foodstuffs over and above their domestic requirements, and by concentrating this surplus used it to support a new

urban population of specialized craftsmen, merchants, priests, officials, and clerks.”²⁵

Of course, “society” did not persuade or compel. Chiefs, priests, and kings made the peasants hand over tribute or tax. Urban concentration of food and fiber supported an extensive division of labor. Craftspersons made weapons, luxury clothing, furniture, jewelry, porcelain and domestic utensils for the exploiting class. Out of their work, along with writing and mathematics by clerks, inventions by engineers, and planned construction by architects came the arts, rudiments of science, and expressions of the human spirit from which Webster's dictionary drew its definition of civilization – ignoring class.

Marking off each civilization

A particular civilization is distinguished by its species of fraud and force. When the state machine takes on a new form, when a religion or social ideology like Confucianism replaces an earlier world outlook, then one civilization has replaced another.

Ancient Rome deployed its armies across a network of military roads to rule a vast empire. The mass ideology was a conglomeration of animistic and polytheistic superstitions and local sects. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Roman civilization on its European territory lost its grip. Local lords ruled estates; kings ruled over a collection of lords, in alliance and contention with the keeper of the new ideology, the Church. So began feudalism.

Feudal civilization in Europe in turn gave way to modern Western civilization. Its forms of government are the constitutional monarchy and the bourgeois republic. Its ideology was formed out of the Renaissance, the scientific method (for physical but not social phenomena), and the Enlightenment, an ideological movement that raised the universal banner of reason but had to find a place for Christianity.

The change from ancient Roman civilization to feudalism did not bring a new mode of production. Most people remained peasants who surrendered crops and forced unpaid labor to landlords, kings, and the Church.

In contrast, the demise of European feudal civilization was also the end of the landlord-peasant mode of production. Capitalist exploitation of labor power replaced it. Feudal nobles became commercial landlords who rented land to capitalists, who in turn hired wage labor or sharecroppers. Capitalist relations opened the way for industrialization in workshops and then factories run as capitalist firms on the backs of wage workers.

While Europe advanced through three major civilizations, Confucian civilization and its landlord-peasant mode of production persisted. This uninterrupted barrier to historical progress is now the pride of the Communist Party of China!

Since 1978 the CPC has become the party of a ruling capitalist class. State-owned corporations operate for profit. So do private capitalists, who employ most of the workers. But the CPC chiefs have a problem. The word “Communist” in the party name is as empty as its socialism. The CPC has no ideology that wins workers’ hearts. Maybe Confucianism will work?

Communist civilization

Most achievements of civilization were denied to peasants in villages, except for indoctrination in the principal religion and state ideology. In the city, people tied to each occupation become one-sided in their activity and outlook. Civilization broadened the range of human-ness, but the division of labor hammers each person into a narrow slot. Engels observed, “Everything civilization brings forth is double edged, double-tongued, divided against itself.”²⁶

Socialist revolution launches a march to communism. The first big task is to abolish exploitation. No one lives off the labor of others, all who can work have work, and production is dedicated to seeing that all have what they need. No one gets extra as a matter of privilege or right. This is the common prosperity of no rich and no poor.

We do not want exploitation to come back, but historical experience taught us that it can happen.²⁷ Classes can spring up again out of differences in the work people do, in their education, and in the authority they exercise. Continual progress from socialism to irreversible communism will require

that every person develops to full human-ness. Communist civilization revolutionizes the division of labor so that everyone does all kinds of work over a variety of time cycles, from rotating activities during the day and the week to mastering several vocations during one's work life. This is the world that we can win.

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