

# Enjeux et positionnements de l'interdisciplinarité

## *Positioning Interdisciplinarity*

Sous la direction de  
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## *Translatio Temporis and Translatio Imperii:*

### From “*Wenming* versus Civilization” to “*Wenming* as Civilization”<sup>1</sup>

Sinkwan Cheng

[Please note:

1. I quote extensively from classical Chinese texts in my publications, and all translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
2. I am attaching the original version I submitted to the editors; the published version is also available in the second half of this file.

Due to some miscommunication, the paper had gone to press before I was sent the draft to proofread. As a result, I was not able to undo a number of well-intended changes that had been made to my essay by the editors (including their substitutions of “Civilization” for “civilization,” and “the timeless Chinese language” for “the tenseless Chinese language.”)

Kindly go by my original version which better conveys my ideas and arguments. Thank you very much!]

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As Western texts were increasingly translated into Chinese in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth-century,<sup>2</sup> Western time consciousness was introduced into the tenseless Chinese language, and the Chinese language became temporalized. This “translation of time,” however, was intertwined with the global reach of Western colonial power, and the temporalization of the Chinese language inseparable from the changing power relations between China and the West. Using Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* method, this essay explores the entwinement of the translation of time consciousness with the transfer of power. The key example for that investigation is the political ramifications of the temporalization of the Chinese term *wenming* as it became the standard translation for “civilization.” Initially a non-temporal concept carrying

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the following institutions for their generous fellowship support that made this project possible: the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University, Ustinov College and Hild Bede College at Durham University, and the International Institute for Asian Studies at Leiden University. Special thanks are also due to Professor Jing Guantao and Professor Liu Qingfeng for granting me access to their research data on semantic changes in late Qing and early modern China, as well as to their assistant Ms. Tzu-yu Hsu for her gracious help.

<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1890s, Chinese translations of Western concepts quite often went through the detour of Japanese translations. Before the First Sino-Japanese War, however, Europe was China’s model, and translations were produced directly from Western texts. Direct translations gradually resumed after the end of 1905 due to a change in Japanese regulations regarding Chinese students. At around this time, the Chinese government once again promoted Europe and the United States instead of Japan for overseas studies. Translating from Western sources became the trend again in the second half of the 1910, and certainly no later than 1919.

certain meanings at odds with the highly temporalized notion “civilization,” *wenming* was eventually saturated with Western semantics. Two initially disparate concepts (“*wenming* versus civilization”) were eventually made “identical” (“*wenming* as civilization”) as the Chinese came to accept the two as equivalent. As I argue in this essay, the Chinese reception history of this translation is both the effect and the cause of China’s changing relations with the colonial powers. In this investigation, I do not content myself with merely using Koselleck’s concepts to understand history; I also use modern Chinese history to interrogate Koselleck’s thinking. The latter is realized in my going beyond the confine of Koselleck’s “asymmetrical counter-concept” to develop a more complex conceptual framework for analyzing power relationships which includes not just confrontations of “friend/enemy” but also strategic negotiations.

The essay seeks to break new ground in yet another direction by steering away from a positivist approach to Chinese history. By using semantic changes to trace social-political transformations, I effect a dialectic between “history on the outside” and “history from the inside,” attending to not only external incidents but also how people in a given period subjectively register those incidents. Since I use semantic changes brought about by translation to explore social-political changes, the point of departure for my examination of the changing *relations* between China and Europe would necessarily be the Chinese’s changing *perceptions* of their ever-evolving status with regard to the West. A country is not yet defeated until her people *recognizes* the other party as the victor. My essay probes China’s progressive loss of her status as a major world power from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth-century not by repeating old reports about how many wars she lost, but by scrutinizing the Chinese people’s progressive acceptance of the Western linear narrative of progress according to which China was backward and only “half-civilized.” In sum, what I am undertaking is the *bringing together of two kinds of intercultural encounters--translation and war—and to use each to draw out the implications of the other.*

In order to examine the history of consciousness alongside social and political history, I have adopted Koselleck’s conceptual history method. Unlike traditional history, *Begriffsgeschichte* takes as its subject matter leading concepts of historical movements” (Koselleck, “*Einleitung*,” xiii),<sup>3</sup> for which reason this essay focuses on the key conceptual pair *wenming/civilization* in China from the First Opium War to the May Fourth Movement. Basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) are “inescapable, irreplaceable parts of the political and social vocabulary” (Koselleck, “Response,” 64). They crystallize the issues at stake for a particular society at a given time. “Civilization” was a key term in Europe that played a pivotal role in driving the projects of modernity and “the White Man’s Burden”—both of which gave Europe its

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<sup>3</sup> Koselleck’s *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* sets the first and primary example for this method.

special *identity* in the world. *Wenming* which had retreated into the background in the Chinese language since the Middle Ages gained unprecedented prominence when it acquired new semantics as a result of its being accepted as the standard translation for “civilization.” *Wenming* became a key term in China no later than the beginning of the early twentieth century as reformists and revolutionaries came to reckon that whether China were to stand or fall depended on the Chinese people’s ability to understand *wenming* anew—that is, to understand *wenming* in the Western sense of “civilization.” Both terms, in other words, crystallized in their respective cultural contexts what was at stake for the being of a people; onto each of these concepts a society projected its anxiety and hope. Key concepts define and drive the choices and actions made by a people at a given historical period, instantiating new conceptions of social, political, and scientific changes, and giving rise to new institutions.

The history of “civilization” as a key term in different European countries has already received substantial scholarly attention. All conceptual history writings on “civilization” I have read so far have followed Koselleck’s *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and examined the history of the term within a national context. Such writings, in other words, are primarily devoted to linguistic/social-political changes across *time*. By contrast, I appropriate Koselleck’s method to investigate similar kinds of changes across *cultures* arising from inter-national activities, and examine how semantic changes brought about by translation can both reflect and effect social and political changes. In this way, I expand Koselleck’s historical method to examine translation, international relations, and power politics.

To make my *begriffsgeschichtliche interrogation of translation and politics particularly relevant for the global age*, I have chosen to focus on the key conceptual pair “civilization/*wenming*” in this paper. That *wenming* should become a key term in China in the early twentieth century after “civilization” had assumed the status of a key term in Europe in the late eighteenth century has been seized by me as a new entry point into the radical shift in power relations between the two regions 100 years after Europe’s Colonizing-Civilizing Process.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of “Civilization” as a basic concept both reflected and effected the rise of different European nations as world powers and colonial powers, in response to which China translated that European concept in an attempt to modernize herself to stand up to colonial challenges. *Using a conceptual history approach to study the reception history of wenming as the Chinese translation for “civilization” allows me a new angle to explore the global reach of European colonial power and its social-political imaginary: I unravel the changing roles between China and the Western colonial powers on the world stage from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, as well as how China perceived those changes, by scrutinizing China’s initial*

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<sup>4</sup> This process came later than the “civilizing process” referred to by Norbert Elias, given that the “Civilizing Process” referred to here references “Civilization” in the collective singular.

*resistance and subsequent embrace of this translation in relation to the changes in her social-political circumstances.*

## PART I. THE CHINESE RECEPTION HISTORY OF *WENMING* AS THE TRANSLATION FOR “CIVILIZATION”

Part I scrutinizes the reception history of *wenming* as the translation for “civilization” in order to demonstrate how the Chinese’s initial resistance to this translation reflected an incommensurability between Chinese and Western values and time consciousness—an incommensurability which was progressively eliminated as the translation itself helped effect changes in the Chinese time-consciousness and social values.

### 1.1. “Civilization,” Linear Time, and Colonialism

Although there is no confirmation from existing scholarship as to when “civilization” was first rendered as *wenming* (文明), it is generally agreed that one of the earliest Chinese receptions of the Western *notion* of civilization could be found in James Legge’s Chinese translation of Charles Baker’s *Graduated Reading: Comprising a Circle of Knowledge in 200 Lessons* (1848).<sup>5</sup> During that period in his life, James Legge was a great believer in the Western concept “civilization” and its attendant ideologies,<sup>6</sup> evident in his translation of *Graduated Reading* into a textbook for students at Ying Wah College in Hong Kong. The book was published in bilingual form by the London Missionary Society in 1856 and 1864. The first printing made its way to Japan in 1860, went through many printings, and exerted great influence there.

Baker’s use of the term “civilization” was not innocent. It is important to note that “civilization” had already been firmly established as a key concept in Western political languages at that time justifying colonialism—the twin brother of modernity in the West. Following the trend in Europe at the time, Baker’s book extolled the superiority of the Western civilization. Lessons 154-157, for example, are entitled “Savage Nations,” “Barbarous Nations,” “Half-Civilized Nations,” and “Civilized Nations,” with the West monopolizing the category of “civilized nations” and China branded as “half-civilized.” Not surprisingly, the book gained tremendous popularity and was used for educating children throughout the British Empire and beyond.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Huang Xingtao, Fang Weigui, and Douglas Howland, who have all given Legge credit in that regard. While some scholars speculated that the Chinese adopted *wenming* as the translation for “civilization” from the Japanese, there exists no definite proof. Regretfully, due to space limitations, I have to cut out my detailed discussion on that subject. At any rate, the issue that really matters is that the *concept* “civilization” was translated into Chinese first, as Legge’s translation of Baker made evident, regardless of who first used *wenming* to translate that Western idea.

<sup>6</sup> James Legge became much more respectful of Chinese culture later on in life after he came to know it first-hand.

Important to note also is that the term emerged in Europe during a period identified by Koselleck as the *Sattelzeit* when social-political vocabulary was radically temporalized—that is, when social-political vocabulary became characterized by a strong linear temporal dimension.<sup>7</sup> It was this linear temporality that legitimized, and gave impetus to, both modernity and colonialism.”Civilization,” along with “progress,” “development,” and “emancipation,” were among the best known of concepts in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries put into motion by a linear temporal framework toward the “*Telos*” of human history. All four concepts were radically temporalized during that period justifying the ideological twins of modernity and colonialism in the West. The term “civilization” emerged in mid-eighteenth-century French and very soon thereafter in English.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to its French antecedents such as *civil* (thirteenth century) and *civilité* (fourteenth century)—all of which in turn derived from the Latin *civitas*—“civilization” was charged with a strong temporal dimension. Indeed, *civilisation* was coined because *civilité* was “a static term, and was no longer [deemed] sufficient” by the eighteenth century, hence the creation of *civilisation* “in order to define together both its direction and continuity” (Benveniste 292). “Civilization” signified a process<sup>9</sup> and was a synonym for progress and the “modernity” of Europe. Adam Ferguson, Condorcet, Boulanger, Herbert Spencer, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill all contributed to this discourse.

Through the narrative of progress, “Civilization” was made into a collective singular<sup>10</sup>—a *Telos* toward which all nations should strive and against which the status of all nations were to

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<sup>7</sup> Koselleck identifies a *Sattelzeit* in German social and political vocabulary in 1750-1850, when the German language was temporalized, ideologized, politicized, and democratized. Although Koselleck’s subject of study is the German language, many conceptual historians find the *Sattelzeit* applicable to other European languages at around that period. Elsewhere, I have argued that the *Sattelzeit* is constituted by, and constitutive of, modernity, and as such is applicable to any country undergoing that process. The language of early twentieth-century China provides a good example.

This essay confines itself to discussing the issue of temporalization. During the *Sattelzeit*, European languages became charged with a strong future dimension and teleological overtone. Numerous future-loaded neologisms emerged including the different forms of “isms.” Koselleck insightfully points out that all forms of “isms” in modernity initially found justification only in their ability to project themselves into the future. Their justification was what they promised to be, and not what they were. All “isms” thus necessarily took on the form of *movement*, suggesting a movement from the present into the future. Take, for instance, the following example from Koselleck: “Republicanism was therefore a concept of movement which did for political action what ‘progress’ promised to do for the whole of history. The whole concept of ‘republic,’ which had *previously indicated a condition*, became a *telos*, and was at the same time rendered into a concept of movement by means of the suffix ‘ism’” (*Futures Past*, 287).

<sup>8</sup> The concept of civilization was quickly translated into many languages, including Italian, German, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian, and Serbian. Before long, the term was also adopted by countries on other continents along with Europe’s imperial expansion.

<sup>9</sup> M. Boulanger, for example, describes civilization as an ongoing process and an advance on the state of “savagery.”

<sup>10</sup> Koselleck uses the expression “collective singular” to discuss the ideologization of the German language during the *Sattelzeit*. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the German social and political vocabulary became increasingly abstract and general in their reference, until they finally became collective singular nouns. Thus “Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions, and from the diversity of revolutions, ‘The Revolution’ emerged” (*Futures Past*, 31). Throughout this paper, “Civilization” in the collective singular denoting a universal norm is being capitalized to distinguish it from the more empirical usage of the word.

be measured. The collective singular is significant. Civilization is a process of standardization and normalization of behaviors. Originally a way of imposing on society the social conventions and moral standards practiced by the upper classes and the urban elite, the “civilizing process” then got transformed from a contrivance of class domination into an apparatus for European colonial domination of non-Europeans. Taking the clue from Elias, Foucault, and Bourdieu, Boutonnet observes that “The process of civilising moral standards, social practices and habits is first and foremost an act of domination: it is an embodiment of dynamics of subjection, a relation that is implemented into the body” (83). The European powers set themselves up as the standard, if not the *telos*, of human history. Knowing that progress depends on the standard being used to measure it, Adam Ferguson remarks: “we are ourselves the supposed standards of progress and politeness”—translated into French as “*les modeles de la politesse et de civilisation*,” in which progress is made the equivalent of “civilization.” Likewise, François Guizot’s influential text *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (1828), translated into nearly all European languages, greatly helped disseminate “civilization” as a key concept and a synonym for progress and for “modernity” taking place in Europe, to be contrasted to “savagery” found outside Europe. His *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (1828) which foregrounds this point was translated into nearly all European languages. As Rumi Sakamoto observes: “what [Guizot] calls the ‘natural’ meaning of ‘world’ civilization is thus nothing natural but is constructed in his discursive act of excluding Asia from the category of civilization” (117).

James Legge’s translation of Baker’s *Graduated Reading* and the concept of “Civilization” it promulgates needs to be read in the context outlined above. As a textbook for students, the goal of Legge’s translation was clear: to “civilize” the Chinese in the British colony. James Legge was also one of the missionaries using “civilization” to translate *wenming* 文明. In their repeated use of terms with a linear temporality to translate classical Chinese concepts, Legge and his fellow missionaries contributed to the temporalization of the Chinese language which turned out to have profound implications for Chinese society and politics.<sup>11</sup>

With the progressive triumph of colonialism over the course of the nineteenth century, existing narratives and features associated with “Civilization” also became more exaggerative and dilatant in content. The colonialistic narrative surrounding “Civilization” gained further momentum as its content expanded to include advancements in technology, military might, and materialistic comforts--associations particularly pronounced in the British Empire. Whereas *civilisation* in its French origin referenced primarily refinement, civilization in England became

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<sup>11</sup> My book project “*Begriffsgeschichte*, Comparative Philosophy, and Comparative Politics: Translation, the Temporalization of the Chinese Language, and Chinese Modernity,” is devoted precisely to examining the social and political ramifications of the temporalization of the Chinese language.

progressively connected to “advancements in comfort, increased material possessions and personal luxuries, improved education techniques, ‘cultivation of the arts and sciences’, and the expansion ‘of commerce and industry’” (Starobinski 1993: 3). Bruce Mazlich agreed with Michael Adas’s observation that, while the emphasis on spiritual or religious superiority continued in the nineteenth century, the word “civilization” was “gradually overtaken by an emphasis on scientific and technological supremacy. Now one was civilized not only in terms of the elder Mirabeau’s original definition, but according to the level of one’s material and technological strength. The West’s primacy in this regard was made manifest in its imperialistic reach to the far corners of the globe.” Mazlich even highlights how Adas captures that change in the latter’s book title on the subject: *Machines as the Measure of Men* (1989) (Mazlich 297). This revised narrative about “Civilization” is, no doubt, *a big boost to colonial success as the civilizers bore on the colonized with claims not just to cultural superiority, but also to military power and high standard of living, both of which appealed more readily to the imagination and aspiration of the colonized—as was the case with the Chinese when they increasingly embraced wenming in the Western sense of “Civilization.”*

### I.2. Incommensurability between “Civilization” and Wenming in Chinese Classics:

In contrast to the heavily temporalized Western concept of “Civilization,” the term *wenming* in its Chinese origin carried no temporal dimension.

*Shangshu* (300 BCE) is one of the earliest existing classical Chinese texts to deploy the term *wenming*, as, for example, in its tribute to Emperor Shun: “[Emperor Shun was] in possession of great wisdom and cultivation (*wenming*); the whole universe was illuminated by his gentle and reverential spirit 浚哲文明，溫恭充塞” (“The Book of Shun 舜典” in *Shangshu* 尚書).<sup>12</sup> According to the annotation of the Tang scholar Kong Yingda 孔穎達, “*Wen* designates the ability to engage the order of the cosmos, *ming* the ability to enlighten the world (經天緯地 曰文，照臨四方曰明).”<sup>13</sup>

In *The Thirteen Canons* (十三經), *wenming* appears most often in *Zhouyi*—it appears six times:

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are mine.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that *ming* in *wenming* means “light” and “shine” was perhaps one reason why *wenming* was adopted to translate civilization, closely linked as the latter was to the ideologies of the Enlightenment (*Lumières* in French and modified as *Aufklärung* in German by Kant.)

- a. “The dragon appears in the field—all under heaven shines with the way of the cosmos (*wenming*) 見龍在田，天下文明”(“On *Wen* 文言” in *Qian* 乾).
- b. “Prosper by the full flourishing of virtue and cultivation (*wenming*) and respond to all situations with uprightness (文明以健，中正而應” (“Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams 象” in “*Tong Ren* 同人”).
- c. “Moral strength and firmness alongside luminous cultivation (*wenming*) 其德剛健而文明“ (“Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams 象” in “*Da You* 大有”).
- d. “The entwinement of the spunky with the gentle constitutes the order (*wen*) of the cosmos. Human order (*wen*) emerges from understanding and arresting oneself with the order of the cosmos and allowing that order to shine (*ming*) 剛柔交錯，天文也；文明以止，人文也” (“Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams 象” in “*Ben* 賁”). According to the annotations of Wang Bai (王弼 “the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than covering with might is the proper human order (*wen*) 止物不以威武而以文明，人之文也.”
- e. “Bright with cultivation (*wenming*) within and gentle without (內文明而外柔順” (“Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams 象” in “*Ming Yi* 明夷”).
- f. “To give pleasure with luminous cultivation (*wenming*) and to set things right with great fortune (文明以說，大亨以正” (“Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams 象” in “*Ge* 革”).

*Wenming* is also an important term in “On Music(樂記)” of *On Propriety* (禮記), believed to have been compiled by Confucius and his followers some time between the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE-221 BCE, and reworked in 206 BCE-8 CE:

Poetry expresses one’s aspiration to which singing gives it music and dancing its movement and shape. All three originate from the heart, and then given expression in musical accompaniment. For this reason, luminous cultivation (*wenming*) ensues from deep feelings, great spirit from strong and abundant energy, and outward splendor from inward gentleness. Musical expressions, in short, should not arise from affected sentiment 詩，言其志也。歌，詠其聲也。舞，動其容也。三者本于心，然后樂器從之。是故情深而文明，氣盛而化神，和順積中而英華發外，唯樂不可以為偽” (“On Music (樂記)”).

It is evident from the above that *wenming* in classical Chinese refers to understanding the order (that is, the pattern or the way) of the cosmos and implementing that way in the human

world. Understanding and harmonizing with the universe had always been upheld as an ideal virtue in classical Chinese thought, and it was believed that humanity could only thrive by properly observing the way of the cosmos. This meaning persisted for centuries in later Chinese usage. In the Southern Dynasty, Bao Zhao 鲍照's "Celebrating the Clear River (河清颂)" says: "The Taijie Constellation is in a straight line, the water of the great river clear; the Honorable Lord reigns high and the world radiates the light of cultivation (*wenming*) (泰階既平，洪水既清，大人在上，區宇文明)." In the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai 李白 continued to use *wenming* with the same meaning: "To teach luminous cultivation (*wenming*) and great undertaking (以文明鴻業，授之元良)" ("Stele Commemorating the Virtuous Rule of the Honorable Wei Gong, Hubei E Provincial Governor and Tianchang Commander 天長節使鄂州刺史韋公德政碑"). So did Song Yingxing (宋應星) in the Ming Dynasty: "Pottery transformed into an elegant vessel with a smooth skin and a jade-like scaffold; concealing and revealing its beauty at the same time, its luminous artistry (*wenming*) is so pronounced (陶成雅器，有素肌玉骨之象焉。掩映幾筵，文明可掬)" ("Making Pottery from Water and Clay 陶埏" in "The Beginning of Creation 天工开物"). Likewise in the Qing Dynasty when Niu Xiu 钮琇 wrote: "[...] once the luminous beauty (*wenming*) inside the jade-stone reveals itself 文明之璞一旦割裂而出" ("Words from the Stone 石言," *Anecdotes* 觚賸).

It should be clear by now that certain incommensurabilities exist between *wenming* in classical Chinese and "civilization" in various Western languages despite their superficial resemblances. To be *wenming* meant to be in harmony with, and to follow, the way of the cosmos which in classical Chinese also roughly meant the way of nature. This renders the concept categorically different from "civilization" with the latter's origin in *civitas*—the Latin word for city which since Aristotle has been associated with human beings' successful conquest of nature.<sup>14</sup> The Western definition of the accomplishments of humanity (that is, civilization) in terms of the conquest of nature<sup>15</sup> and—by extension, the subjugation of "savages"—were absolutely foreign to the pre-modern Chinese understanding of *wenming*. Wang Bai's annotations to *Yijing*, for example, explained that "the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might is the proper human order." Nor could *wenming* in the pre-modern Chinese sense be acquired through time (that is, through humanity's progressive

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<sup>14</sup> In this way, despite the usual lineup of "culture" as the opposite of "nature" and "civilization" of "barbarism," there is a close link between "culture" and "civilization" that also poses "civilization" against nature.

<sup>15</sup> "Culture" and "civilization" were often used interchangeably even until the first half of the nineteenth century. Andrew Sartori pointed out how "culture" was understood in Germany at this time "in a collective sense to describe the degree to which a specific people or nation had achieved in *overcoming their subjection to nature*— such as technological advancement in the overcoming of nature, rational administration and the rule of law, the softening of manners and the development of institutions of learning and education that were benchmarks of 'civilization' (Fisch, "Zivilisation, Kultur," 679)." (Sartori 678; my italics)

overcoming of its first “nature” which it shared with animals, explicitly referred to in Norbert Elias’s *Civilizing Process*, thereby justifying those “further along” on the evolutionary schema dominating the less advanced). Quite the contrary: *wenming* was seen by the ancient Chinese as human beings understanding, returning to, and harmonizing with, their *original* nature. *Wenming for the ancient Chinese was thus “backward” and “inward” looking , in contrast to “civilization”’s “forward” and “outward/expansionist” orientations.*

Although the pre-modern Chinese did believe in their cultural superiority , there was no concept of a “civilization” that sums up the cultural achievements of a people, and *wenming* certainly was not the signifier for that non-existing concept. *Also, the pre-modern Chinese belief about China’s cultural superiority was not embedded in any linear narrative of progress.*

### 1.3. The Temporalization of Wenming

The Chinese reception history of the term *wenming* as the translation for “civilization” was deeply implicated in China’s changing response to colonialism—a colonialism realized not just in the form of physical conquest but also in the form of mental “conversion” of the subjugated to the conqueror’s worldview. By adopting a conceptual history approach, I am going to demonstrate how the Chinese’s initial reluctance to use *wenming* in a Westernized sense and their subsequent shift to an eager embrace of that translation was intricately entwined with the changing power relations between China and the West.

#### 1.3.1. The Chinese’s Initial Indifference to the Western Concept of “Civilization” and their Cold Reception of *Wenming* as its Chinese Translation

As Koselleck pointed out, conceptual change never coincides with social and political change despite their inseparability, because “linguistic comprehension does not catch up with what takes place or what actually was the case, nor does anything occur without already being changed by its linguistic assimilation” (*Conceptual History*, 23). The Chinese’s initial defeat at the hands of the British and other colonial powers did not immediately make them deem themselves “behind” the Western “civilization.” For decades afterwards, they remained oblivious to the European idea of “progress” and its correlative “civilization” so central to Western projects of modernization. This obliviousness could be detected not so much in the *content* of the materials being translated into Chinese as to the little change that took place in the Chinese *language* during this period.

Language enables certain ways of thinking while restricting others. The lack of a linear temporality in the classical Chinese language on the one hand reflected the absence of a linear time-consciousness in traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, it also hampered its

speakers from experiencing time in terms of progress. As I argue elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> only with the temporalization of the Chinese language did China become truly ready for modernity. For example, tenses did not exist in classical Chinese. The introduction of time markers into the Chinese language under the influence of translation brought a linear concept of time to Chinese society, and only with that new way of experiencing time could “the modern” become conceivable for the Chinese people. It is not surprising that China’s linguistic revolutions took place alongside the country’s quest for scientific, economic, and political modernity.

Yet the temporalization of the Chinese language did not immediately take off after the Opium Wars. Needless to say, the fact that classical Chinese was a tense-free language contributed to the difficulties for its speakers to accept the linear worldview framing the Western concept “civilization.” On the other hand, the Chinese’s resistance to adopting the classical expression *wenming* as the Chinese equivalent of “civilization” may also be a *reflection* of their reluctance to condone a linear temporality in which their culture was being accorded a position inferior to the West. Indeed, their reluctance may have been further fortified by the fact that *wenming* in classical Chinese had always referred to spiritual rather than materialistic accomplishments, and for centuries the Chinese had been especially convinced of their superiority in virtue. Prior to the First Sino-Japanese War (1 August 1894 – 17 April 1895), *wenming* was rarely used to translate “civilization,” despite the fact that, by the 1850s, the missionaries had already been making various efforts to impress upon Chinese society the Western concept of “civilization.” The truth however evidenced that the Chinese language remained immune to the influence of Western temporality for decades after the Opium Wars.

During this period, various terms were used to translate “civilization,” including “refined by culture (風化),” “educated and refined (教化),” “elegant (文雅),” “open and refined by culture (開化),” “flourishing in arts and letters (文教興盛),” “cultivated and enlightened (修明),” and “cultured (有化).”<sup>17</sup> The Protestant journal *Shanghai Serial* (六合叢談), published in January 1857--June 1858 by the London Missionary Society in Shanghai, introduced new fields of Western sciences into China. The term *wenming* was not used in this serial; rather, “civil rule (文治)” and “civil education (文教)” were being deployed to disseminate Western ideas of civilization. The American Presbyterian missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin used “elegant (文雅)” to translate “civilization” in Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International* (1863). The Chinese translation of *Homely Words to Aid Governance* (佐治刍言 in 1885 rendered

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<sup>16</sup> Due to the space limit, I have to move this discussion to my book manuscript *Begriffsgeschichte, Comparative Philosophy, and Comparative Politics: Translation, the Introduction of Linear Time into the Chinese Language, and Chinese Modernity*.

<sup>17</sup> The translators obviously did not distinguish between “*wenhua* (culture)” and “*wenming* (civilization)” at this point. This is not surprising. *Wenming* and *wenhua* were very similar and basically interchangeable in classical Chinese, both being atemporal concepts.

“civilization” into “arts and letters (文教.” At this stage, the missionaries’ strategies for “civilizing” the Chinese were primarily that of adapting the Western concept of “civilization” to traditional Chinese thinking .

A search through the famous dictionaries of this period yields similar finding. Prior to the Hundred-Day Reform 戊戌维新 of 1898, no English-Chinese dictionaries—be those compiled by the Chinese or the missionaries--listed 文明 as the Chinese corresponding term for “civilization.” Most of them used “refined and cultivated (教化)” instead. The word “civilization” did not appear in the *English and Chinese Lexicon* compiled by Kwong Tsün Fuk. The *English and Chinese Dictionary* (字典匯集) compiled by Tam Tat Hin (譚達軒) rendered “civilization” as “to educate with manners, cultivation, politeness, and elegance (教以禮儀、教化之事、禮貌、文雅)” (145).<sup>18</sup> The Chinese at this point conflated civilization with culture and used them both in an atemporal sense, in a way more faithful to the ancient meanings of *wenming* and *wenhua* than the temporalized meaning of “civilization” in the West.

It is evident from the above that the Western concept “civilization” failed to gain access to the Chinese consciousness for a very long time even after the Opium Wars, and the bending of the classical Chinese term *wenming* to translate “civilization” came even later. Especially worth noting is that whenever the term *wenming* was used in late Qing, it continued to be used as a counter-concept to *yeman* (barbarism)—in keeping with the meaning of the term in ancient Chinese texts. Also, when *wenming* was finally used to refer to “civilization,” it was often used interchangeably with *wenhua*, both being non-temporal concepts, as they both were in classical Chinese texts. In other words, *prior to the First Sino-Japanese War, wenming remained primarily a classical Chinese concept.*

### I.3.2. The Chinese’s Progressively Eager Embrace of a Temporalized *Wenming* after the First Sino-Japanese War

*Wenming* used in a Western sense—that is, temporalized to convey progress—burgeoned with great popularity as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War (1 August 1894 – 17 April 1895). China’s loss in the Sino-Japanese War was the last straw that galvanized China into confronting her own inadequacies. The loss to Japan did not just change China’s spatial concept—the fact that she was not the “Center of the World.” More importantly, her loss to her once subservient neighbor finally shocked her into taking seriously a linear temporal concept in which she saw herself as falling behind different nations in world history, and in which she might become the

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<sup>18</sup> Acknowledgement is due to Huang Xingtao and Fang Weigui.

victim of “natural selection”<sup>19</sup> if she did not try to catch up with the West. This was how the temporal dimension of “civilization” finally became understood by the Chinese literati, and the temporalization of *wenming* to translate “civilization” became accepted by many Chinese elites .

*Wenming* with the modern semantics started appearing frequently in newspapers and petitions for reform. It became a widely accepted term at least among those abreast of current affairs—especially the reformists and activists such as Kang Youwei(康有為), Liang Qichao (梁啟超), Yan Fu (嚴復), Tan Sitong (譚嗣同), Tang Caichang (唐才常), and Zhang Taiyan (章太炎) . Even the conservative Ye Dehui (葉德輝) started using the term in a modern sense. Significantly enough, most people who used the term this way approved of the values it embodied, and acknowledged the superiority of the West and Japan with which the term was associated. The adoption of the term *reflected* the Chinese’s identification with its values; it also *effected and reinforced* that identification.

There were, however, two kinds of receptions of *wenming* associated respectively with two movements after the war—the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred-Day Reform.

### 1.3.2.1. *The Self-Strengthening Movement* (洋務運動 or 自強運動, 1861–1895)

Between 1861-1898, scholars and government officials such as Feng Guifen (馮桂芬), Xue Fucheng (薛福成), and Zhang Zidong (張之洞) advocated adopting Western technologies while maintaining traditional Chinese social and political structures. This principle, first proposed by Feng in 1861,<sup>20</sup> was most famously summed up by Zhang’s 1898 formula “Chinese learning as the guiding principle (*ti*); Western learning for practical utility (*yong*) (中學為體，西學為用)” (“On the Necessity to Study Hard (勸學篇)”). This is to say, the Chinese statesmen and scholars<sup>21</sup> began to *maintain two concepts of time* based on two understandings of *wenming*: they held on to the atemporal ancient Chinese *wenming*, in the domain of non-materialistic matters such as ethics and politics, but began to acknowledge the need to adopt a temporalized Western *wenming* when it came to science and technology. In other words, officials involved in the Self-Strengthening Movement continued to regard ancient Chinese wisdom as

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<sup>19</sup> The Chinese espoused a highly colonialistic version of social Darwinism, under the influence of Yan Fu’s interpretation and selective translation of Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*.

<sup>20</sup> Feng is generally credited to be the first person to formally explore this idea: “Chinese ethics as the foundation, and enrich it with other nations’ techniques and methods for self-enhancement and self-augmentation 以中國之倫常名教為原本，輔以諸國富強之朮” (“On Adopting Western Learning in *Critiquing the State from the XiaoBin Residence* 校邠廬抗議·采西學議, 211).

<sup>21</sup> The Chinese ministers and scholars were often the same people due to the Confucius tradition of recruitment by imperial examination.

having abiding authority across space and time over perennial issues such as ethics and politics. Nonetheless, they pushed for adopting Western science and military technology, and hence a series of efforts in China to build shipyards and arsenals, to hire foreign advisors on such matters, and to translate and pursue Western learning.<sup>22</sup> Basic industries, communications, and transportation were developed, and the military modernized, on the principle of grafting Western technology onto Chinese institutions.

“*Ti-yong*(體用)” was a Buddhist concept (later also adopted by Neo-Confucianism), *ti* referring to the essence whereas *yong* the function and the use. The differences between the two can also be articulated as the underlying, unchanging substance versus that which is in motion. Technology can be outdated versus truth which is timeless. For the Reformists, Chinese learning was the atemporal truth versus Western learning whose brilliance was temporal but nonetheless useful for helping China to move forward in the meantime. For a culture which had for centuries prioritized the internal over the external, morality over efficiency, and integrity over utility, it is obvious that advocates of this doctrine continued to regard the Chinese civilization as superior. Zhang Zhidong and his likeminds continued to value “atemporal wisdom” over “temporal tools”—a legacy that had flourished especially under Buddhism with its perspectives on time and change as illusions. They believed that the intelligence and others like him Chinese civilization were superior to those of the West, and that by adopting Western technology, China would eventually prevail over the bullies. For this reason, people in this camp were in general uninterested in any social reform beyond economic and military modernization.

### *I.3.2.2. The Hundred-Day Reformists<sup>23</sup> and Yan Fu (嚴復)*

Following China’s defeat by France in Indo-China in 1885, more and more literati understood that changes more fundamental than those of the Self-Strengthening Movement would be necessary to save China, and that China needed “basic Western *wenming*” (infrastructures such as a new governmental structure, educational system, and improved commerce) to support “scientific *wenming* 科學文明” (technological development). Unlike the Self-Strengtheners, this group tended to espouse a linear progressive understanding of *wenming* not only in science but also in politics. This should not be surprising. The most prominent of these intellectuals--Yan Fu and the Hundred-Day Reformists—were heavily influenced by social Darwinism and its ideology of the “survival of the fittest,” hence their understanding of *wenming* was also strongly temporalized, as its corresponding term “civilization” was in the West at that time. It was no coincidence that the most important venues through which *wenming* with

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<sup>22</sup> Translations had been taking place since the 1840s—that is, after the first Opium War.

<sup>23</sup> The Hundred-Day Reform lasted from June 11 to September 21, 1898.

modern Western semantics became popularized were Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and the *Journal of Current Affairs* (時務報). *Current Affairs* was the mouthpiece of the Hundred-Day Reformists, Liang being one of its major contributors.

With a more thorough vision of reform than the Self-Strengtheners, the Reformists and Yan Fu avidly championed not just *wenming* technology such as railway, Western mathematics, but also democracy, civil institutions, police structure, and even modern Western time-consciousness and its related custom of making and keeping appointments. Liang Qichao used the term *wenming* to promote not only technological but also social and political reforms--from democracy and the rule of law to hygiene, and from feminism to education. A telling example is Liang Qichao's "An Open Letter to Mr. Yan Yiuling (與嚴幼陵先生書)" in Spring, 1897. Apparently influenced by the "discourse of world history then ubiquitous in the West—a discourse going hand-in-glove with the discourse of "civilization"—Liang spoke about the inevitable triumph of democracy in human history and urged China to practice democracy in order to become *wenming*—that is, civilized:

Democracy has not always been the practice of all nations since classical antiquity, and China is no exception. Over the past hundred years, however, popular sovereignty has gained much ground in the West, hence the rise of the West. If China would start adopting such practice, she would be equal to the West in several decades, and civilized (*wenming*) in a hundred years.

Liang also understood a rational legal system to be part and parcel of civilized society. In March, 1898, he argued that the degree of a country's *wenming* could be measured in terms of its success in establishing a fair, open, and precise legal system ("China Should Adopt Legal Thinking (論中國宜講求法律之學)," 78).

Another clear sign of Liang's identification of *wenming* with "Civilization" was his advocacy of feminism (as a *wenming* practice in his famous "Petition for Reform (變法通議)" in 1896. Not surprisingly, Liang deemed education to be inseparable from *wenming*, and criticized China's mass illiteracy as incommensurable with her pride in her *wenming*: "China is well-known among the five continents for her *wenming* (being civilized). Yet there aren't even thirty people who can read among every one hundred (中國以文明號于五洲,而百人中識字者,不及三十人)" ("Preface to Shen Xue's *Universal System* 沈氏音書序," 90). In relation to education, Liang's contemporaries began to view learned societies, public libraries, and newspaper circulations as signs of how civilized a society was. Learned societies began to mushroom not long after Liang's promotion of a Westernized concept of *wenming* (see Zhang, "On Learned

Societies”). Attention also turned to public educational facilities. In *Public Newspaper on All Nations* (萬國公報), Lu Hanzhang (盧愨章) linked the strength of the West to its public libraries: “Public libraries educate both the rich and the poor, male and female, the young and the old, for which reason the flourishing or stifling of talents is related directly to the number of libraries and bears on the fate of a nation (公書庫則富貴貧賤、男女老少,無不培植,故人才之得失,關乎書庫之多少,關乎國家之盛衰。歐美文明之國,人才眾多,邦國富強,屬地廣大,莫不由是而至也)” (82). Tan Sitong, on the other hand, linked the lack of interest in newspapers to a society’s backwardness in his complaint to Tang Caichang: “The society’s closed-mindedness and backwardness is such that the *Journal of Current Affairs* sold only 200 copies in Nanjing (金陵銷《時務報》僅及二百份,蓋風氣之通塞、文化之啟閉,其差數亦如此也).” (Cai 262).

*The fact that conceptual change can both reflect and effect social and political changes is evident here. As mentioned before, Liang was one of the most important popularizers of the westernized, temporalized usage of wenming. With Liang and the popularization of this new concept, modern Western values became accepted by Chinese society, and the Chinese intelligentsia increasingly resorted to the modern sense of wenming to think about reform issues. The growing popularity of learned societies and newspapers provided some examples of how modern Western values began to occupy Chinese minds along with the saturation of wenming with Western semantics.*<sup>24</sup>

Another equally (if not more) influential popularizer of a temporalized concept of *wenming* was Yan Fu. Yan was important due to his prominent role as a translator of Western thoughts, and in particular his translation of evolutionism, hence his special sensitivity to Western time-consciousness and his solid understanding of the temporal dimension of “civilization” (which he generally translated as *kaihua* (開化)). Adopting the West’s linear concept of time, Yan in an essay in early 1895 contrasted the West to China as “forward-looking” versus “backward looking” (“Urgent Need for Changes (論世變之亟)”). In May of the same year, he again emphasized that China had to choose between reform or subjugation, and urged China to engage in serious self-reflections on a number of practices faulted by the West as backward and uncivilized--practices such as footbinding, castration, and torture (“Saving China from Subjugation: An Urgent Discussion (救亡決論)”). His criticism of Chinese customs made

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<sup>24</sup> Many thanks to Huang Xingtao and Fang Weigui for their provision of rich lists of examples which I draw on for making my argument.

evident that his understanding of “civilization” was by no means confined to technology. Perhaps the text where Yan’s introduction of the temporalized notion of “civilization” made its greatest impact on Chinese society was his famous 1897 translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (天演論)--a translation in which Yan tied *wenming* to evolutionism.

### *I.3.2.3. The New Culture Movement (1915-1921) and May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1919*

The Reformists’ embrace of a temporalized concept of *wenming* was radicalized by the May Fourth Movement which rejected the Chinese tradition wholesale in favor of a modernized, Westernized, and “civilized” China—the three adjectives being synonyms. On May 4, 1919, a mass student protest broke out against the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles. Two decades’ devotion to Western and Japanese learning had created in the intellectuals a feeling of frustration with traditional Chinese morality, family structure, and Confucianism, all of which were blamed for causing China to lag behind the West. The Chinese nationalists called for a wholesale rejection of traditional values and the regeneration of Chinese culture through adopting practices associated with Western civilization, especially democracy and science. Not surprisingly, one of the main tenets of this movement was an “orientation toward the future rather than the past”—fully in line with the ideology underpinning “civilization” during this era.<sup>25</sup>

Intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement launched a complete denunciation of both the materialistic and the spiritual aspects of Chinese civilization. In extreme cases, traditional Chinese culture was condemned not simply as “half-civilized” but even as “anti-civilization,” with the old traditions taking the blame for obstructing China’s path to becoming civilized. Thus, Lu Xun described the feudalistic tradition as “cannibalistic.” Chinese intellectuals at this point thoroughly embraced and enthusiastically promoted *wenming* in a Western temporalized sense in place of its former atemporal meaning.

Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀), a major figure in the May Fourth Movement, declared the hallmarks of modern *wenming* to be: 1. human rights, 2. evolutionism, and 3. socialism. In addition, only the “European *wenming*” could be called modern. Like most intellectuals of his time, Chen eagerly embraced and advocated a Westernized and temporalized concept of *wenming*. The Chinese term *wenming* was by now saturated with Western semantics. What conceptual history can tell us is: the occupation was not limited to any particular concept alone. Semantics took root in an entire cultural consciousness. The history of concepts could lay bare the origins and developments of ideologies. After the May Fourth Movement, the colonization of

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<sup>25</sup> Other tenets of this movement included the championing of vernacular literature and democratic values, an end to patriarchy, a rejection of the superiority of Confucians culture, and critical examination of Chinese classics.

*wenming* by “civilization” became part and parcel of the colonization of many other aspects of the Chinese people’s daily life and values. The popular Chinese consciousness became very much preoccupied with the Western valorization of progress and modernity. Luo Jianqiu (羅檢秋) pointed out that many Western inventions characterized as “barbaric (夷)” or “from overseas (洋)” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were rebaptized as “civilized (*wenming*)” by the very end of the Qing Dynasty. Thus, bikes, automobiles, electrical appliances, apartment buildings, sofas, eyeglasses, etc. were all renamed “civilized (*wenming*) apparatuses (文明器具).” Car-racing, horse-racing, ball games, and swing were named “civilized (*wenming*) diversions (文明遊戲).” Tap water, banks, telephone, the police, Western restaurants all became symbols of a civilized lifestyle. Western-style marriages, burials, and manners all acquired the prefix “civilized (*wenming*),” such as “*wenming* marriages.”

## PART II. FROM “WENMING VERSUS CIVILIZATION” TO “WENMING AS CIVILIZATION”: NEW CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING CHINA’S CHANGING RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* has given me new ideas for rethinking Translation Studies and International Relations. At the same time, the complexity of China’s changing relations with Western colonial powers has prompted me to go beyond Koselleck’s theory of “asymmetrical counter-concepts.”

Under the influence of Carl Schmitt, Koselleck tends to approach the human world (which he calls “the historical world”) from the viewpoint of “friend versus enemy,” overlooking many other possible structures of human relationships. For Koselleck, “the historical world[...]operates for the most part with asymmetrical concepts” which “deny the reciprocity of mutual recognition” and are “unequally antithetical” (161):

From the concept of the one party follows the definition of the alien other, which definition can appear to the latter as a linguistic deprivation, in actuality verging on theft. This involves asymmetrically opposed concepts. The opposite is not equally antithetical. The linguistic usage of politics, like that of everyday life, is permanently based on this fundamental figure of asymmetric opposition. (160-61)

Like many post-structuralists, Koselleck is wary of the power hierarchy established by binary oppositions. Unlike his French contemporaries, however, Koselleck’s focus is not binary opposites in particular but the concept of concepts. This has allowed me to think beyond asymmetrical counter-concepts to other forms of conceptualization to better address the complexities of international relations.

Stepping outside the Schmittean frame of mind, one could see that concepts do not necessarily have to relate to each other as “friend/enemy.” Other conceptual combinations are possible, such as parallel concepts, complimentary concepts, and competing concepts. Going beyond Koselleck’s theory in the manner described above makes possible more precise and nuanced analyses of international relations whose complexity resists being contained within the framework of counter-concepts. Let me give as an example my following analysis of the decline and reemergence of China on the world stage since the Opium Wars—a history which can by no means be explained via counter-concept alone:

After the Opium Wars, China receded from being a master concept in the world into a non-concept. When China rejoined the United Nations, at first she existed merely as a parallel concept to other nations. With her gradual rise, however, China evolved into a competing concept among major world powers whenever other nations had to choose between building diplomatic ties with China or with China’s “enemies.” On occasions such as the 6th East Asian Summit, China even presented herself as a counter-concept to the world’s superpower—that is, the United States. To the extent that conceptual changes reflect social-historical changes, when China evolves from a parallel concept to a competing concept to the West, we can detect in that change the rise of China on the world stage.

Particularly worth noting is that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China has even evolved into a counter-concept to the world’s superpower—that is, the United States. The China versus the US scenario at the 6<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit can be read productively by deploying a *Begriffsgeschichte* method, albeit with an enlarged conceptual frame that breaks the confines of Koselleck’s asymmetrical counter-concept. Again, let me emphasize, concepts do not just reflect but can also effect social and political changes. Thus, China’s changing roles on the world stage have been to a certain extent a product of China’s own strategic management of what kind of concept she chooses for herself in relations to other nations in different contexts. Despite many countries’ perceptions of China as a competing concept or even a counter-concept to themselves, China appeases them by overtly projecting herself as merely their parallel concept—evident in her repeated declarations of her desire to coexist harmoniously with others and that her rise will not affect other nations. In diplomatic situations calling for a strong stance, however, China would deliberately assert herself as a counter-concept to nations such as Japan. Let me now apply this model to reflect on the analysis I gave of the Chinese reception history of *wenming* as the translation for “civilization,” and analyze how this reception history carries within itself the imprint of the history of the decline of China on the world stage between the First Opium War and the May Fourth Movement, and how the Chinese people interpreted and coped with that decline. The reception history in question could be described as “from ‘*wenming* versus civilization’ to ‘*wenming* as civilization.’”

1. *“Civilization” as a Non-Concept:*

For centuries, the Chinese had believed in their cultural superiority, but there was no concept in classical Chinese comparable to the Western notion of “civilization.” *Wenming*, the term later adopted as the translation for “civilization,” originally referred to the virtues of a person or a society. Western civilization and the Western notion of civilization were simply *non-concepts* for the pre-modern Chinese.

Even after China’s defeat in the First Opium War, the Chinese’s ingrained belief in their country’s cultural superiority initially rendered it difficult for them to think otherwise. It took until the twentieth century before “civilization” would be entered into the dictionaries in China, and for *wenming* to be accepted as its Chinese translation, although the acknowledgement of the superiority of Western technology arrived much sooner among the Chinese elites. For at least three decades after the First Opium War, Western concepts and ideas were not even deemed as parallel to Chinese thoughts, not to mention being regarded as competing or counter-concepts.

2. *“Civilization” as a Competing Concept--Wenming Versus “Civilization” and the Beginning of a Pluralism:*

The First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) finally awakened the Chinese elites to the urgency of learning from the advanced technology of “Western *wenming*” in order to avoid subjugation. However, even then the Chinese elites would acknowledge Western superiority only in technology. The Self-Strengtheners who advocated “Chinese learning as the guiding principle; Western learning for practical utility” recognized Western civilization as a competitor against Chinese *wenming*, with the Chinese on top in spiritual and ethical matters but Western “civilization” ahead in science and technology. They were still confident that China would outlast the West by harnessing Western technology to Chinese ethics and politics. *Particularly worth noting is that the Chinese elites at this stage developed a pluralistic concept of wenming.*

3. *Colonialism and Homogeneity: “Civilization” as the Master-Concept and Modern Wenming as a Sub-Concept; Traditional Chinese Wenming Relegated to the Status of an Assymetrical Counter-Concept and the Complete Occupation of Wenming by Western Semantics*

The pluralistic understanding of *wenming* promoted by the Self-Strengtheners was quickly stifled by the complete occupation of *wenming* by the temporality of Western

semantics. By the time of the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese had whole-heartedly embraced “Civilization” in the collective singular as promoted and represented by the West. Given that only one standard—the Western standard—was accepted for measuring how advanced any society is, the old Chinese civilization was no longer referred to as *wenming*, but dismissed instead as the asymmetrical counter-concept of “Civilization,” so much so that 5000 years of Chinese civilization—material *and* spiritual--was sweepingly condemned as “counter-Civilization” or “anti-Civilization.”

4. *Appendix: The Return of Wenming as a Parallel Concept to “Civilization” in the Twenty-First Century, and the Return from Homogeneity to Diversity:*

In the recent three decades, with the increasing return of the Chinese people’s confidence in their own cultural traditions (such as the rehabilitation of Confucianism), the old Chinese civilization is acknowledged once again as a *wenming*. “Classical Chinese *wenming*” reentered the world stage, usually in the form of a parallel concept to Western civilization. On occasions, it would be upheld as a competing concept and even counter-concept to the over-materialistic Western civilization. With China’s repeated emphasis on its peaceful rise in the world, the older Chinese meaning of *wenming* as per Wang Bai—that is, “the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than covering with might is the proper human order (*wen*)”--has been gradually restored.

### PART III. SEMANTIC CHANGES AND POLITICS

#### III.1. Radical Semantic Changes Indicative of a Nation in Crisis

A good conceptual historian would be savvy at deciphering the social-political changes behind the semantic changes. Significantly, *the radical change in the semantics of wenming took place precisely when China underwent an unprecedented loss of their traditional sense of cultural superiority—that is, at around the time of the May Fourth Movement.*<sup>26</sup> As late as the Self-Strengthenment Movement, the elites who were the most aware of world affairs still remained unshaken in their faith as to the superiority of traditional Chinese culture. The May Fourth Movement marked the turning point in Chinese history when the Chinese for the first time ever underwent a complete loss of faith in their own culture. *Wenming*, a positive term, was emptied of its traditional atemporal semantics, and was invested instead with the highly temporalized semantics of “civilization.” *The abrupt semantic change, in other words, was symptomatic of a cultural crisis in Chinese history. A good conceptual historian would know*

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<sup>26</sup> As mentioned before, “civilization” was not a concept that existed in ancient Chinese. Prior to the twenty-first century, “culture 文化” and “civilization 文明” were often used interchangeably.

*how to, through analyzing conceptual changes, detect crises and opportunities in a given society, and plans could be made accordingly as to how to assume human agency and deploy new concepts to effect desirable changes in society and politics.*

From the increasing takeover of the Chinese term *wenming* by Western semantics—a takeover that culminated in the transformation of that term into a “World Criterion” used by the Chinese during the May Fourth Movement to condemn pre-modern China as “anti-civilization”—one could detect the increasing reversal of roles between China and Europe from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century—a reversal which seems to be heading toward yet another reversal in the twenty-first century. Drawing from my earlier analysis of the civilizing process as a mode of domination, the increasing domination of China by Europe could also be described from the eventual conquest of China by the concept of “Civilization” in the collective singular. The history of the rise of the collective singular in Europe would be instructive for understanding the political significance of the Chinese’s eventual subscription to the idea of “Civilization.” As Melvin and Michaela W. Richter explains, “Under the systems of estates and orders characteristic of pre-revolutionary Europe, political and social concepts tended to be specific and particularistic, referring in the plural to well-defined social gradations and privileges such as the liberties of the *Bürger* (citizens) of a city. But beginning in the eighteenth century, those older terms remaining in use began to become more general in their social reference, more abstract in meaning, and became collective singular nouns” (“Introduction”). The rise of the collective singular in Europe during the *Sattelzeit*, however, by no means signified that modernity was a period of global consensus. Far from being a period of universal agreement, modernity was characterized by an explosion of ideas and competing viewpoints, with each school and idea vying to universalize its particular will and to dominate the whole world with its own position. Neologisms representing newly created ideologies were coined in unprecedented numbers, such as liberalism, conservatism, anarchism, socialism, and communism. The social and political fields were populated with numerous ideas and concepts contesting against each other, with the strongest overwhelming other voices in their contests for the claim of “Truth” in the collective singular.

The development of the collective singular inside European nations took inspiration from the increasing erosion of the estates and other local authorities by a central state. Colonialism transposed this hierarchy between the central and the local to the international order. The conquest of non-European nations such as China by “Civilization” in the collective singular signified the erosion of the voices from all civilizations by the Master Civilization. Koselleck’s observation about the power politics involved in the developments of collective singulars inside individual European nations is equally applicable to international power politics: “a given group

makes an exclusive claim to generality, applying a linguistically universal concept to itself alone and rejecting all comparisons. (*Futures Past*, 160).

Note that “Civilization” was itself an offshoot of “(World) History,” both concepts in turn intimately tied to “Progress.” During the *Sattelzeit*, “History” also became a collective singular “encompassing the totality of histories and projecting them onto a larger shared scenario for human action through the course of centuries” (Sebastián 122). Likewise, “Progress” “[became] a transhistorical term and a factor full of temporal potential for *legitimizing historical-political projects*” (Pankakoski, “Reoccupation,” 17; my italics)—the projects baptized as the “White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling. Koselleck points out how “The contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, initially a result of overseas expansion, became a basic framework for the *progressive construction for the growing unity of world history*” (*Futures Past*, 256; my italics). “Civilization” was the tool for that construction.

Concepts can shape the world in a particular direction. As a collective singular imposing standardization and normalization, “Civilization” can itself transform peoples and cultures of the world into collective singulars. This operation is typically performed by either excluding or converting the non-conforming elements,<sup>27</sup> with the “inconvertibles” being denied human and civilized treatments,<sup>28</sup> and thus massacres and brutality could coexist with European Civilization. Thomas Boutonnet’s analysis of the predicament of the subalterns inside the nation during the civilizing process can be appropriated to describe the predicament of the subalterns under colonialism:

These moral and social standards and practices, to which the whole population is expected to conform, constitutes a civilising and normalising process that expels those whose behaviours or moral standards do not comply with the social order to the margins of [the world].<sup>29</sup> This process distances those who can’t be part of the [international ] community, but it also exercises a centripetal normalising force capable

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<sup>27</sup> Universalism has a much longer and stronger tradition in Chinese and Indian thoughts than in the West. However, there are major differences between Chinese and European universalisms. Take, for example, the pre-modern Chinese concept *wenming*. Pre-modern China had no interest or will of universalizing their idea of *wenming* through conquest or conversion (wars had been fought, but for other reasons); nor was there a political agenda associated with *wenming* in ancient Chinese texts such as *Shangshu*. Furthermore, the Chinese did not deem themselves as having a monopoly on *wenming*. *Wenming* is a state of being cultivated, and hence anyone or any society deemed cultivated could be called *wenming*. A foreigner (“barbarian”) would be regarded *wenming* if s/he was cultivated, as much as a Chinese without cultivation would be deemed barbaric. Confucius himself advised: “Since we have lost our cultivations, we must learn it from the foreigners/barbarians 禮失求諸野” (recorded in both Liu Qin 劉歆’s *Seven Categories* 七略 and Ban Gu 班固’s “On Arts and Letters 藝文志” in *Hanshu* 漢書).

<sup>28</sup> Even the “convertibles” were never accorded full human and civilized treatments, because they were “not white/not quite,” as Homi Bhabha puts it.

<sup>29</sup> I substitute “the world” for “the nation,” and the “international” for the “national” community, in order to apply Boutonnet’s reading of the civilizing project operated by the nation-state to the same kind of project operated by the colonial state.

of bringing those who were sent to, or were considered part of, the periphery back to the centre of the social space.

Primarily a standardization process, “civilisation aims at creating a homogenised space that feeds political concepts and ideologies.” (Boutonnet 85).

### III.2. The Politics of Counter-Concepts by Association: From “Wenming as Civilization” to “The Non-West as Uncivilized”

Given that “Civilization” was more or less interchangeable with “the West,” *once wenming was being made into the Chinese equivalent for “Civilization,” wenming was no longer a mere counter-concept to yeman.*<sup>30</sup> *The binary pair wenming / yeman (civilized / barbaric) carry within them another binary pair: the West / the non-West. Henceforward, wenming was no longer a mere counter-concept to uncivilized; it had also become conscripted as a counter-concept to the non-West.* Koselleck observes that the creation of counter-concepts in the modern West was a political act. By translating into Chinese such creation, the Chinese transferred over its politics also. .

### III.3. Counter-Concept-Substitutions and the Reshuffling of Power Hierarchy

Counter-concepts can be used to scrutinize the reshuffling of power in yet another manner –that is, by studying the substitutions of counter-concepts over time. *Wenming/ yeman (civilized/ barbaric), for example, emerged in the Chinese language around the May Fourth Movement to displace an earlier binary pair Yi/Xia 夷/夏.* As #1 of the following display of the evolution of the character *Yi* shows, *Yi* is derived from an ideogram signifying a human being carrying a bow and was originally used to designate “the Easterners” (that is, those living east of the Mainlanders):

Due to their “bow-bearing” lifestyle, the *Yis* were deemed as unrefined, pugnacious, and ignorant of the importance and the art of harmonious coexistence with others—all of which being traits deemed barbaric by the Mainlanders. The word later came to designate all the “barbaric” Eastern tribes, and even generalized from time to time to refer vaguely to any “foreigner.” The derogatory overtone of *Yi* was further augmented when it was set in binary opposition to *Xia*—

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<sup>30</sup> The notion *yeman* (a rough equivalent of “barbaric”) already existed in Chinese. However, its contrasting concept was not “civilized” but “cultivated.”

the latter expression being derived from the Xia Dynasty. According to *Zuozhuan*, the name *Huaxia* (華夏) was first used during the ancient *Xia* (夏) Dynasty, when propriety was highly regarded, to refer to the whole country of China as a refined culture, where *xia* (夏) meant “great” or “grand” and *hua* (華) described the “illustrious and splendid attires” of the ancient Chinese people. *Huaxia* (華夏) was to be used by subsequent dynasties in a broader sense to refer to the country with a splendid culture. The binary pair *Yi/Xia* came to stand in for another pair of contrasting concepts “barbaric/cultivated,”<sup>31</sup> with the Chinese representing refinement and cultivation, and foreigners the barbaric. However, with the substitution of *Yi/Xia* by *wenming/yeman* at around the May Fourth Movement, the attribute “barbaric” got shifted from characterizing “the foreigners” to “the Chinese” themselves. In order to redeem themselves, *the Chinese must create another counter-concept: this time the counter-concept is no longer “foreign cultures,” but “the old Chinese culture” against which a modern China—a new China more commensurable with the (Western) notion of “Civilization,” needed to be created. Interestingly enough, the newly invented counter-concepts “old feudalistic China”/“New Modern China” were made possible by the Chinese embrace of Western linear concept of time in the first place.*

## TO CONCLUDE: TRANSLATION AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

*The semantic change in wenming from being incommensurable with the materialistic and temporal dimensions of “civilization” to being made identical with it as a result of translation, coupled with the substitution of the contrasting concepts Yi/Xia by the counter-concepts Wenming/Yeman, exerted long-range impact on how China reinvents herself and the kind of image “the New China” wants to project on the world stage.*

Before China’s embrace of Western values, *wenming* and “Civilization” embodied different sets of cultural ideals in the East and in the West. The ideal pursued by the pre-modern Chinese for human beings and society were spiritual cultivation and harmony with the universe—which included harmony with nature and other human beings. Technology was not included as part of *wenming*. *Wenming* was also counter-posed to conquest: “the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might 威武 is the proper human order” (Wang Bai). Pugnaciousness and the love of conquests were deemed “barbaric” and associated

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<sup>31</sup> The term “contrasting concepts” is used instead of “counter-concepts.” Strictly speaking, counter-concepts in the Western sense did not really exist in pre-modern Chinese culture due to the fact that *yang* already contains within itself the *yin* and vice versa. Thus, the “barbarians” were capable of becoming cultivated, as much as the Chinese themselves could become barbaric if they commit barbaric practices.

with the *Yis*.<sup>32</sup> Nor was there a temporal schema underpinning *wenming* urging “the cultivated” to conquer and convert “the uncultivated.” “Civilization,” on the other hand, celebrated “advancements in comfort, increased material possessions and personal luxuries, improved education techniques, ‘cultivation of the arts and sciences,’ and the expansion ‘of commerce and industry’” (Starobinski 1993: 3). The linear temporality grounding “Civilization” practically turned the urge to conquer and to “civilize” the non-Europeans into a mission and a moral obligation of the White Man. The May Fourth Movement’s rejection of the old meaning of *wenming* in favor of making the term the Chinese “equivalent” of “Civilization,” no less than the substitution of *Yi/Xia* by *wenming/yeman* in the modern Chinese language, reflected a radical change in Chinese values. Above all, in both cases, *conceptual changes helped bring about a turning point in Chinese social values and Chinese foreign policy.*

Once *wenming* was standardized as the translation for “Civilization,” military might and commercial expansion became core concepts of, rather than contrasting concepts to, *wenming*. *The May Fourth Movement’s realignment of positive semantics with “Civilization” and “the foreign,” and negative semantics with “the old wenming” and “feudalistic China,” removed certain old inhibitions (such as the association of the use of force with barbarism), opened up a new realm of action, and turned Chinese society and international politics in a new direction.* This semantic reassignment of positive values to “Civilization” and negative values to feudalistic *wenming* lent legitimacy to the New China’s revolt against its over 2000 years’ prioritization on spiritual cultivation, and steered the nation toward urgent projects of scientific and military modernization—a legacy that reached its feverish peak during the Cold War Period as Communist China came under the pressure of both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. Hence the relentless purging of Confucianism and all traditional Chinese thinking during the Cultural Revolution in pursuit of reckless and even unrealistic modernization aspirations. Hence also China’s complete turning of her back on her pre-modern prioritization of harmonizing with nature, in favor of relentless modernization even at the expense of the environment. Furthermore, it was during the Cultural Revolution when condemnation of feudalistic thinking reached its peak that China abandoned its thousands of years’ belief in harmonizing with others as the highest good (Confucius) and the best strategy (Sunzi), to adopting a pronounced belligerent attitude toward its enemies—a belligerence which in feudalistic China would have been deemed barbaric. The adoption of Western semantics through translation, in other words, fundamentally transformed the Chinese’s *Weltanschauung*, impacting even the way how people relate to each other in modern Chinese society, and how modern China relates to other nations on the world stage.

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<sup>32</sup> Even the famous Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝—the first emperor who significantly expanded the Chinese territory, were repeatedly criticized by historians for “coveting glory and conquests 好大喜功.”

Of course, China's repeated losses on the battlefield from the First Opium War to the First Sino-Japanese War already shook the Chinese into the Self-Strengthening Movement calling for modernization of technology. However, without a change in semantics—made possible by the May Fourth Movement's wholesale condemnation of traditional Chinese values and its reinterpretation of *wenming* with Western semantics-- "the New China" could not have gained complete "freedom," legitimacy, and normative grounding to pursue the project of a "New and Strong China" in a belligerent manner at the expense of harmony and spiritual cultivation. To appropriate Koselleck's observations, one could say that the May Fourth Movement's establishment of a new *wenming* as a counter-concept to the old *wenming* violated the old *wenming*'s authority and its disproportionate prioritization of the spiritual above the material, and as such allowed China new action and practice, thereby moving China into a new phase of history: "Concepts employable in a particularly antithetical manner have a marked tendency to *reshape the various relations and distinctions among groups, to some degree violating those concerned, and in proportion to this violation rendering them capable of political action*" (*Futures Past*, 162; my italics). This is followed by Koselleck's observation that "The recognition of such a dynamic requires that former linguistic usage must itself be placed in question" (*Futures Past*, 162). In this paper, the key concept whose former linguistic usage needed to be placed in question to enable the dynamics of the May Fourth was the old *wenming*. The last sentence in the quote just given from Koselleck is interesting: *without semantic change, revolution in the sense of both social and political changes would be impossible. Tradition lives through language. So long as language remained unchanged, the old social order would persist.* That is why the Self-Strengtheners's efforts to modernize China was bound to fail. Only when *wenming* was fully accepted as the translation for "Civilization"—that is, only when *wenming* was fully occupied by Western semantics, was it possible for China to modernize herself without inhibitions or constraints. Translation injects new semantics into old expressions. This is why revolutions have always been accompanied by translation. This is also why China went through two linguistic revolutions in modern times.

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## *Translatio Temporis and Translatio Imperii:*

### From 'Wenming versus Civilisation'

### to 'Wenming as Civilisation'

Sinkwan CHENG

#### ABSTRACT

As Western texts were increasingly translated into Chinese in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Western time consciousness was introduced into the *timeless* Chinese language, and the Chinese language became temporalised. This 'translation of time', however, was inter-related with the global reach of Western colonial power, and the temporalisation of the Chinese language is thus inseparable from the changing power relations between China and the West. Using Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* method, this essay explores the entwinement of the translation of time consciousness with the transfer of power. The key example for this investigation is the political ramifications of the temporalisation of the Chinese term *wenming* as it became the standard translation for 'civilisation'. Thus, *wenming* was eventually saturated with Western semantics. This article argues that the Chinese reception history of this translation is both the effect and the cause of China's changing relations with the colonial powers. The argument presented here uses modern Chinese history to interrogate Koselleck's thinking.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Comme les textes occidentaux étaient de plus en plus traduits en chinois à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, la conscience occidentale du temps a été intégrée à la langue chinoise qui, par définition, est atemporelle. De ce fait, elle a pris une dimension temporelle. Cependant, cette conception du temps était étroitement liée au rayonnement dans le monde des puissances coloniales occidentales et, en conséquence, elle est devenue inséparable des relations de pouvoir fluctuantes entre la Chine et le monde occidental. S'appuyant sur la méthode *Begriffsgeschichte* de l'historien Koselleck, cet article examine l'imbrication de la traduction de la conscience du temps avec la notion de transfert de pouvoir. Les ramifications politiques de la temporalisation du mot *wenming* pour traduire le mot civilisation en est un exemple pertinent. Ainsi, *wenming* s'est empreint d'une coloration occidentale. Cet article montre que l'histoire de la réception de ce concept est à la fois l'effet et la cause des relations fluctuantes de la Chine avec les puissances coloniales. Cette étude s'appuie sur l'histoire de la Chine moderne pour remettre en question la pensée de Koselleck.

Reality knows no disciplinary divides; thus the analysis of reality and the solutions to its problems must be undertaken in an interdisciplinary manner. Life in its complexity resists compartmentalised analyses and responses; likewise civilisation – that complex of intellectual, cultural and material activities in their interrelatedness; likewise history – the reflection on what has transpired in human civilizations.

History is necessarily dialectical, insofar as it involves subjective reflection on external occurrences. Connecting idea and material reality, historical reflection is thus necessarily interdisciplinary. This dialectical and interdisciplinary nature is especially foregrounded in Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *Begriffsgeschichte*. By engaging social-political history via the history of concepts and semantics, *Begriffsgeschichte* makes clear that concepts are inevitably caught up in (social-political) history, but that (social-political) history is always already concepts, rhetoric, philosophy, and politics. This article offers a case study of the Chinese concept of *wenming* and its interaction with the Western concept of Civilisation, in an effort to concretely demonstrate how an interdisciplinary approach is indispensable for the study of civilisations in their colonial encounters.

As Western texts were increasingly translated into Chinese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (sometimes via Japanese translations), Western time-consciousness was introduced into the timeless Chinese language, and the Chinese language became temporalised. This 'translation of time', however, was interrelated with the global reach of Western colonial power, and the temporalisation of the Chinese language is thus inseparable from the changing power relations between China and the West. The translation of time consciousness explored in this article is thus inextricably entwined with the transfer of power. The key example considered here is that of the temporalisation of the Chinese term *wenming*, which became the standard translation for 'Civilisation'. Initially a non-temporal concept carrying certain meanings at odds with the highly temporalised notion 'Civilisation', *wenming* eventually became saturated with Western semantics. Two initially disparate concepts ('*wenming* versus Civilisation') were eventually made identical ('*wenming* as Civilisation') as the Chinese came to accept the two as equivalent. This process in turn had significant political ramifications. The Chinese reception history of this translation is both the effect and the cause of China's changing relations with Western colonial powers. In order to investigate this process, the argument put forward here does not only use Koselleck's concepts to understand history; it also uses modern Chinese history to interrogate Koselleck's thinking. In order to accomplish this, I go beyond the confines of Koselleck's 'asymmetrical counter-concept' to develop a more complex conceptual framework for

analysing power relationships; one which not only includes confrontations of ‘friend/enemy’ but also leaves room for strategic negotiations.

It establishes to break new ground in yet another direction by steering away from a positivist approach to Chinese history. By tracing social-political transformations via semantic changes, the article establishes a dialectic relationship between ‘history on the outside’ and ‘history from the inside’, attending to not only external incidents but also to how people in a given period subjectively register those incidents. Since the argument put forward here uses semantic changes brought about by translation to explore social-political changes, the point of departure for this article’s examination of the volatile relations between China and Europe is necessarily that of changing Chinese perceptions of their ever-evolving status in relation to the West. A country is not yet defeated until her people recognise the other party as the victor. My essay probes China’s progressive loss of her status as a major world power from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, not by repeating old reports about how many wars she lost, but by scrutinizing the Chinese people’s progressive acceptance of the Western linear narrative of progress, according to which China was backward and only ‘half-civilised’. In sum, what I am undertaking in this article is the bringing together of two kinds of intercultural encounters – that of translation and that of war – using each to draw out the implications of the other.

In order to examine the history of consciousness alongside social and political history, I have adopted Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual history method. Unlike traditional history, *Begriffsgeschichte* ‘takes as its subject-matter leading concepts of historical movements’ (Koselleck 1972, xiii)<sup>1</sup>, for which reason this article focuses on the key conceptual pair *wenming*/Civilisation in China from the First Opium War to the May Fourth Movement. Basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) are ‘inescapable, irreplaceable parts of the political and social vocabulary’ (Richter 77). They crystallise the issues at stake for a particular society at a given time. ‘Civilisation’ was a key term in Europe that played a pivotal role in driving the projects of modernity and ‘the White Man’s Burden’ – both of which gave Europe its special identity in the world. *Wenming*, which had retreated into the background in the Chinese language since the Middle Ages, gained unprecedented prominence when it acquired new semantics as a result of its being accepted as the standard translation for ‘Civilisation’. *Wenming* became a key term in China no later than the beginning of the early twentieth century, as reformists and revolutionaries came to reckon that whether China were to stand or fall depended on the

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1. The primary example of Koselleck’s method can be found in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. All translations from foreign languages are those of the author unless otherwise indicated.

Chinese people's ability to understand *wenming* anew – that is, to understand *wenming* in the Western sense of 'Civilisation'. Both terms, in other words, crystallised in their respective cultural contexts what was at stake for the being of a people; onto each of these concepts a society projected its anxieties and hopes.

The history of 'Civilisation' as a key term in different European countries has already received substantial scholarly attention. For the most part, conceptual history writings on the subject follow Koselleck's *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and examine the history of the term within a national context. Such writings, in other words, are primarily devoted to examining linguistic and social-political changes over time. By contrast, what I seek to do in the present study is to appropriate Koselleck's method as a means of investigating similar kinds of changes across cultures and examine how semantic changes brought about by translation can both reflect and effect social and political changes. In this way, I expand Koselleck's historical method to examine translation, international relations, and power politics.

That *wenming* should become a key term in China in the early twentieth century after 'Civilisation' had assumed the status of a key term in Europe in the late eighteenth century is taken in this article as a new entry point into the study of the radical shift in power relations between the two regions that occurred about 100 years after the beginning of Europe's colonizing-civilising process<sup>2</sup>. The emergence of 'Civilisation' as a basic concept both reflected and effected the rise of different European nations as world powers and colonial powers, in response to which China translated that European concept in an attempt to modernise herself to stand up to colonial challenges. Using a conceptual history approach to study the reception history of *wenming* as the Chinese translation for 'Civilisation' offers a new angle from which to explore the global reach of European colonial power and its social-political imaginary space. Such a study makes it possible to unravel the changing roles of China and the Western colonial powers on the world stage from the late-nineteenth to the early twentieth century – as well as how China perceived those changes – by scrutinizing China's initial resistance and subsequent embrace of this translation in relation to the changes in her social-political circumstances.

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2. This 'colonising-civilising' process came later than the 'civilising process' described by Norbert Elias, given that the process referred to here references 'Civilisation' in the collective singular.

## The Chinese reception history of *wenming* as the translation for ‘Civilisation’

### ‘Civilisation’, linear time and colonialism

Although there is no confirmation from existing scholarship as to when ‘Civilisation’ was first rendered as *wenming* (文明), it is generally agreed that one of the earliest Chinese receptions of the Western notion of Civilisation is to be found in James Legge’s Chinese translation of Charles Baker’s *Graduated Reading: Comprising a Circle of Knowledge in 200 Lessons* (1848)<sup>3</sup>. At that time of his life, James Legge was a great believer in the Western concept of ‘Civilisation’ and its attendant ideologies<sup>4</sup>, as is evident in his translation of *Graduated Reading* into a textbook for students at Ying Wah College in Hong Kong. The book was published in bilingual form by the London Missionary Society in 1856 and 1864. The first printing had made its way to Japan by 1860, where it subsequently went through many printings, and exerted great influence.

Baker’s use of the term ‘Civilisation’ was not innocent. It is important to note that ‘Civilisation’ had already been firmly established as a key concept in Western political language at that time – a concept that justified colonialism – the twin brother of modernity in the West. Following the trend in Europe at the time, Baker’s book extolled the superiority of the Western civilisation. Lessons 154-157 of his *Graduated Reading*, for example, are entitled ‘Savage Nations’, ‘Barbarous Nations’, ‘Half-Civilised Nations’, and ‘Civilised Nations’. The West monopolises the category of ‘civilised nations’, while China is branded as ‘half-civilised’. Not surprisingly, the book gained tremendous popularity and was used for educating children throughout the British Empire and beyond.

Beyond this imperialist context, it is also important to notice that the term gained importance in Europe during the period identified by Koselleck as the *Sattelzeit*, when social-political vocabulary became radically temporalised – that is, when social-political vocabulary became characterised by a strong linear temporal dimension<sup>5</sup>. It was this linear

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3. See, for example, Fang Weigui and Douglas Howland, who have given Legge credit in this regard. While some scholars have speculated that the Chinese adopted *wenming* as the translation for ‘civilisation’ from the Japanese, there exists no definite proof. The full history of this question is beyond the scope of the present article. The important point for the present discussion is that the *concept* ‘Civilisation’ was translated into Chinese first, as Legge’s translation of Baker makes evident.

4. Legge became much more respectful of Chinese culture later in his life after he came to know it first-hand. See especially Girardot for an account of the stages in Legge’s engagement with Chinese culture.

5. Koselleck identifies a *Sattelzeit* in German social and political vocabulary in the period 1750-1850, when the German language was temporalised, ideologised, politicised and democratised (xv). Although Koselleck’s subject of study is the German language, many

temporality that legitimised, and gave impetus to, both modernity and colonialism. ‘Civilisation’, along with ‘progress’, ‘development’, and ‘emancipation’, were among the best known of concepts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that were put into motion by a linear temporal framework, and directed toward the *telos* of human history. All four concepts were radically temporalised during this time period, helping to justify the ideological twins of modernity and colonialism in the West. The term ‘Civilisation’ emerged in mid-eighteenth-century French and appeared in English very soon thereafter<sup>6</sup>. In contrast to its French antecedents such as *civil* (thirteenth century) and *civilité* (fourteenth century) – all of which in turn derived from the Latin *civitas* – ‘civilisation’ was charged with a strong temporal dimension. Indeed, *civilisation* was coined because *civilité* was ‘a static term, and was no longer [deemed] sufficient’ by the eighteenth century, hence the creation of *civilisation* ‘in order to define together both its direction and continuity’ (Benveniste 292). ‘Civilisation’ thus signified a process and was a synonym for progress and for the ‘modernity’ of Europe<sup>7</sup>. Adam Ferguson, Condorcet, Boulanger, Herbert Spencer, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill all contributed to this discourse.

Through the narrative of progress, ‘Civilisation’ was made into a collective singular – a *telos* toward which all nations should strive and

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conceptual historians have found *Sattelzeit* to be applicable to other European languages at around the same period. In a forthcoming article entitled ‘Conceptual History and a New Politics of Translation’ I have argued that the *Sattelzeit* is constituted by, and constitutive of, modernity, and as such is applicable to any country undergoing the process of modernisation. The language of early twentieth-century China provides a good example of this process.

The subject of the present article is confined to the question of temporalisation. During the *Sattelzeit*, European languages became charged with a strong emphasis on the future and acquired teleological overtones. Numerous future-loaded neologisms emerged, including a variety of ‘isms’. Koselleck insightfully points out that all the ‘isms’ associated with modernity initially found justification only in their ability to project themselves into the future – in what they promised to be, and not what they were. ‘Isms’ thus necessarily took on the form of movement – suggesting a movement from the present into the future. The following example from Koselleck is instructive in this regard: ‘Republicanism was therefore a concept of movement which did for political action what “progress” promised to do for the whole of history. The whole concept of “republic”, which had previously indicated a condition, became a *telos*, and was at the same time rendered into a concept of movement by means of the suffix “ism”’ (2013, 273).

6. The concept of civilisation was quickly translated into many languages, including Italian, German, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Russian and Serbian. Before long, the term was also adopted by countries on other continents as it spread in parallel with Europe’s imperial expansion.

7. M. Boulanger, for example, describes civilisation as an ongoing process and an advance from the state of ‘savagery’: ‘[w]hen a savage people has become civilized, we must not put an end to the act of *civilisation* by giving it rigid and irrevocable laws; we must look upon the legislation given to it as a form of *continuous civilisation*’ (quoted in Bowden 9).

against which the status of all nations was to be measured<sup>8</sup>. The collective singular is significant. Civilisation is a process of standardisation and normalisation of behaviours. Originally a way of imposing on society the social conventions and moral standards practiced by the upper classes and the urban elite, the ‘civilising process’ subsequently evolved from a means of class domination into an apparatus for European colonial domination of non-European societies. Taking his cue from Elias, Foucault and Bourdieu, Thomas Boutonnet observes that

the process of civilising moral standards, social practices and habits is first and foremost an act of domination: it is an embodiment of dynamics of subjection, a relation that is implemented into the body. (83)

The European powers set themselves up as the standard, if not the *telos*, of human history. Knowing that progress depends on the standard being used to measure it, Adam Ferguson remarks that ‘we are ourselves the supposed standards of progress and politeness’ – a phrase that is translated into French as ‘*les modèles de la politesse et de civilisation*’, in which progress is made the equivalent of ‘civilisation’. Likewise, François Guizot’s influential text *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (1828), which was translated into nearly all European languages, greatly helped disseminate the idea that ‘civilisation’ was synonymous with the progress toward ‘modernity’ taking place in Europe and that it should be contrasted with the ‘savagery’ found outside Europe. As Rumi Sakamoto observes: ‘what [Guizot] calls the “natural” meaning of “world” civilisation is thus nothing natural but is constructed in his discursive act of excluding Asia from the category of civilisation’ (117).

James Legge’s translation of Baker’s *Graduated Reading* and the concept of ‘Civilisation’ it promulgates should be read in this context. As a textbook for students, the goal of Legge’s translation was clear: to ‘civilise’ the Chinese in the British colony. Legge was also one of the missionaries who used ‘civilisation’ to translate *wenming* (文明). In their repeated use of terms with a linear temporality to translate classical Chinese concepts, Legge and his fellow missionaries contributed to the temporalisation of the Chinese language – a process which ultimately had profound implications for Chinese society and politics.

With the progressive triumph of colonialism over the course of the nineteenth century, existing narratives associated with ‘Civilisation’

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8. Koselleck uses the expression ‘collective singular’ to discuss the ideologisation of the German language during the *Sattelzeit*. Beginning in the eighteenth century, German social and political vocabulary became increasingly abstract and general, with a marked increase in the use of collective singular nouns. Thus ‘Freedom took the place of freedoms, Justice that of rights and servitudes, Progress that of progressions, and from the diversity of revolutions, “The Revolution” emerged’ (2013, 31). Throughout this article the word ‘Civilisation’ is capitalised wherever it is used in the collective singular in this fashion.

became more exaggerated and expansive in content, including advances in technology, military might and materialistic comforts. These associations became particularly pronounced in the British Empire. Whereas in its original French usage *civilisation* referenced primarily refinement, civilisation in England became progressively connected to

advancements in comfort, increased material possessions and personal luxuries, improved education techniques, ‘cultivation of the arts and sciences’, and the expansion ‘of commerce and industry’. (Starobinski 3)

Bruce Mazlich develops this idea, agreeing with Michael Adas’s observation that, while the emphasis on spiritual or religious superiority continued in the nineteenth century, the word ‘civilisation’ was

gradually overtaken by an emphasis on scientific and technological supremacy. In this version of things, one is civilized not only in terms of the elder Mirabeau’s original definition, but according to the level of one’s material and techno-economic strength. The West’s primacy in this regard was made manifest in its imperialistic reach to the far corners of the globe. (Mazlich 113)

Elsewhere, Mazlich draws attention to the manner in which the title of Adas’s 1989 book, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, captures this evolution in the word’s meaning. This revised narrative about ‘Civilisation’ facilitated colonial success, since the ‘civilisers’ bore on the colonised with claims not just of cultural superiority, but also of military power and a higher standard of living, both of which appealed more readily to the imagination and aspiration of colonised peoples – as was the case with the Chinese when they increasingly embraced *wenming* in the Western sense of ‘Civilisation’.

### ***Incommensurability between ‘Civilisation’ and wenming in Chinese classics***

In contrast to the heavily temporalised Western concept of ‘Civilisation’, the original usage of the Chinese term *wenming* carried no temporal dimension.

*Shangshu* (300 BCE) is one of the earliest existing classical Chinese texts to employ the term *wenming*, as, for example, in its tribute to Emperor Shun: ‘[Emperor Shun was] in possession of great wisdom and cultivation (*wenming*); the whole universe was illuminated by his gentle and reverential spirit’ [浚哲文明, 溫恭充塞] (‘The Book of Shun [舜典]’ in *Shangshu* [尚書])<sup>9</sup>. According to the annotation of the Tang scholar Kong Yingda [孔穎達] ‘*Wen* designates the ability to engage the order of the

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9. All translations from the Chinese are those of the author unless otherwise noted. The original text is given in square brackets immediately after the translation.

cosmos, *ming* the ability to enlighten the world’ [經天緯地曰文，照臨四方曰明]<sup>10</sup>.

In *The Thirteen Canons* [十三經], *wenming* appears most often in *Zhouyi* – six times in all:

- a. ‘The dragon appears in the field – all under heaven shines with the way of the cosmos (*wenming*)’ [見龍在田，天下文明] (‘On *Wen*’ [文言] in *Qian* [乾]).
- b. ‘Prosper by the full flourishing of virtue and cultivation (*wenming*) and respond to all situations with uprightness’ [文明以健，中正而應] (‘Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams’ [象] in ‘*Tong Ren*’ [同人]).
- c. ‘Moral strength and firmness alongside luminous cultivation (*wenming*)’ [其德剛健而文明] (‘Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams’ [象] in ‘*Da You*’ [大有]).
- d. ‘The entwining of the spunky with the gentle constitutes the order (*wen*) of the cosmos. Human order (*wen*) emerges from understanding and arresting oneself with the order of the cosmos and allowing that order to shine (*ming*)’ [剛柔交錯，天文也；文明以止，人文也] (‘Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams’ [象] in ‘*Ben*’ [賁]). According to the annotations of Wang Bai [王弼] ‘the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might is the proper human order (*wen*)’ [止物不以威武而以文明，人之文也].
- e. ‘Bright with cultivation (*wenming*) within and gentle without’ [內文明而外柔順] (‘Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams’ [象] in ‘*Ming Yi*’ [明夷]).
- f. ‘To give pleasure with luminous cultivation (*wenming*) and to set things right with great fortune’ [文明以說，大亨以正] (‘Foretelling the Future using the Divinatory Trigrams’ [象] in ‘*Ge*’ [革]).

*Wenming* is also an important term in ‘On Music’ [樂記] of *On Propriety* [禮記], which is believed to have been compiled by Confucius and his followers some time between the fifth century BCE and 221 BCE, then reworked between 206 BCE and 8 CE:

Poetry expresses one’s aspiration to which singing gives its music and dancing its movement and shape. All three originate from the heart, and then given expression in musical accompaniment. For this reason, luminous cultivation (*wenming*) ensues from deep feelings, great spirit from strong and abundant energy, and outward splendour from inward gentleness. Musical expressions, in short, should not arise from affected sentiment. [詩，言其志也；歌，詠其聲也；舞，動其容也 三者本于心，

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10. The fact that *ming* [明] in *wenming* means ‘light’ and ‘shine’ was perhaps one reason why *wenming* was adopted as a translation for ‘civilisation’, closely linked as the latter was to the ideologies of the Enlightenment (le Siècle des *Lumières* in French and later modified as *Aufklärung* in German by Kant).

然后樂器從之 是故情深而文明， 氣盛而化神， 和順積中而英華發外，  
唯樂不可以為偽] (‘On Music’ [樂記])

It is evident from the above that *wenming* in classical Chinese refers to understanding the order (that is, the pattern or the way) of the cosmos and implementing that way in the human world. Understanding and harmonizing with the universe had always been upheld as an ideal virtue in classical Chinese thought, and it was believed that humanity could only thrive by properly observing the way of the cosmos. This meaning persisted for centuries in later Chinese usage. In the Southern Dynasty, Bao Zhao’s [鮑照] ‘Celebrating the Clear River’ [河清頌] says:

The Taijie Constellation is in a straight line, the water of the great river clear; the Honorable Lord reigns high and the world radiates the light of cultivation (*wenming*). [泰階既平，洪水既清，大人在上，區宇文明]

In the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai [李白] continued to use *wenming* with the same meaning:

To teach luminous cultivation (*wenming*) and great undertaking. [以文明鴻業，授之元良] (‘Stele Commemorating the Virtuous Rule of the Honorable Wei Gong, Hubei E Provincial Governor and Tianchang Commander’ [天長節使鄂州刺史韋公德政碑])

So did Song Yingxing [宋應星] in the Ming Dynasty:

Pottery transformed into an elegant vessel with a smooth skin and a jade-like scaffold; concealing and revealing its beauty at the same time, its luminous artistry (*wenming*) is so pronounced [陶成雅器，有素肌玉骨之象焉 掩映幾筵，文明可掬] (‘Making Pottery from Water and Clay’ [陶埏] in ‘The Beginning of Creation’ [天工开物])

Likewise in the Qing Dynasty Niu Xiu [鈕琇] wrote of

the luminous beauty (*wenming*) inside the jade-stone [that] reveals itself [文明之璞一旦割裂而出] (‘Words from the Stone’ [石言], *Anecdotes* [觚臚]).

It is clear from all these examples that *wenming*, as it is used in classical Chinese texts, and ‘civilisation’, as it is used in various Western languages, are incommensurable, despite their superficial resemblances. To be *wenming* meant to be in harmony with, and to follow, the way of the cosmos, which in classical Chinese also roughly meant the way of nature. This renders the concept categorically different from ‘Civilisation’, with the latter’s origin in *civitas* – the Latin word for ‘city’, which, since Aristotle, has been associated with the successful conquest of

nature by human beings<sup>11</sup>. The Western definition of the accomplishments of humanity (that is, Civilisation) in terms of the conquest of nature – and by extension, the subjugation of ‘savages’ – was absolutely foreign to the pre-modern Chinese understanding of *wenming*. Wang Bai’s annotations to *Yijing*, for example, explained that ‘the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might is the proper human order’. Nor could *wenming* in the pre-modern Chinese sense be acquired over the course of time (that is, through humanity’s progressive overcoming of an original ‘nature’ that it shares with animals – an idea referred to in Norbert Elias’s *Civilizing Process*, which justifies those ‘further along’ on the evolutionary schema dominating the less advanced). Quite the contrary: *wenming* was seen by the ancient Chinese as a process that led human beings to understand, return to, and harmonise with, their original nature. *Wenming* for the ancient Chinese was thus ‘backward’ and ‘inward’ looking, in contrast to the forward-looking and expansionist orientations of ‘Civilisation’.

Although the pre-modern Chinese did believe in their cultural superiority, there was no concept of a ‘civilisation’ that summed up the cultural achievements of a people, and *wenming* certainly was not the signifier for that non-existing concept. Also, the pre-modern Chinese belief about China’s cultural superiority was not embedded in any linear narrative of progress.

### ***The temporalisation of wenming***

The Chinese reception history of the term *wenming* as the translation for ‘Civilisation’ is deeply tied to China’s changing response to colonialism – a colonialism realised not just in the form of physical conquest but also in the form of mental ‘conversion’ of the subjugated to the conqueror’s worldview. By adopting a conceptual history approach, it is possible to chart the movement from an initial reluctance by the Chinese to use *wenming* in a Westernised sense to their subsequent eager embrace of that translation. This evolution was symptomatic of the changing power relations between China and the West.

As Koselleck pointed out, conceptual change never coincides with social and political change despite their inseparability, because ‘linguistic comprehension does not catch up with what takes place or what actually was the case, nor does anything occur without already being changed by its linguistic assimilation’ (2002, 23). The initial defeat of the Chinese at the hands of the British and other colonial powers did not immediately make them deem themselves ‘behind’ Western ‘Civilisation’. For decades,

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11. In this way, despite the usual assumption that ‘culture’ is the opposite of ‘nature’ and ‘civilisation’ the opposite of ‘barbarism’, there is a close link between ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’ that also opposes ‘civilisation’ to nature.

they remained oblivious to the European idea of ‘progress’ – and its correlative ‘Civilisation’ – that was so central to Western projects of modernisation. This obliviousness can be detected not so much in the *content* of the materials being translated into Chinese as in the little change that took place in the Chinese *language* during this period.

Language enables certain ways of thinking while restricting others. The lack of a linear temporality in the classical Chinese language on the one hand, reflected the absence of a linear time-consciousness in traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, it also hampered its speakers from experiencing time in terms of progress. As I argue elsewhere, only with the temporalisation of the Chinese language did China become truly ready for modernity<sup>12</sup>. For example, tenses did not exist in classical Chinese. The introduction of time markers into the Chinese language under the influence of translation brought a linear concept of time to Chinese society, and only with that new way of experiencing time could ‘the modern’ become conceivable for the Chinese people. It is not surprising that China’s linguistic revolutions took place alongside the country’s quest for scientific, economic, and political modernity.

Yet the temporalisation of the Chinese language did not begin immediately after the Opium Wars. Needless to say, the fact that classical Chinese was a tense-free language contributed to the difficulties for its speakers to accept the linear worldview framing the Western concept of ‘Civilisation’. On the other hand, Chinese resistance to adopting the classical expression *wenming* as the equivalent of ‘Civilisation’ may also be a reflection of their reluctance to condone a linear temporality in which their culture was accorded a position inferior to the West. Indeed, their reluctance may have been further fortified by the fact that *wenming* in classical Chinese had always referred to spiritual rather than materialistic accomplishments, and for centuries the Chinese had been especially convinced of their superiority in virtue. Prior to the First Sino-Japanese War (1 August 1894 - 17 April 1895), *wenming* was rarely used to translate ‘civilisation’, despite the fact that, by the 1850s, the missionaries had already been making various efforts to impress the Western concept of ‘Civilisation’ upon Chinese society. The truth was: the Chinese language remained immune to the influence of Western temporality for decades after the Opium Wars.

During this period, various terms were used to translate ‘civilisation’, including ‘refined by culture’ [風化], ‘educated and refined’ [教化], ‘elegant’ [文雅], ‘open and refined by culture’ [開化], ‘flourishing in arts

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12. These subjects are covered at length in a forthcoming book entitled *Begriffsgeschichte, Comparative Philosophy, and Comparative Politics: Translation, the Introduction of Linear Time into the Chinese Language, and Chinese Modernity*.

and letters’ [文教興盛], ‘cultivated and enlightened’ [修明], and ‘cultured’ [有化]<sup>13</sup>. The Protestant journal *Shanghai Serial* [六合叢談] (published between January 1857 and June 1858 by the London Missionary Society in Shanghai), introduced new fields of Western sciences into China. The term *wenming* was not used in this serial; rather, ‘civil rule’ [文治] and ‘civil education’ [文教] were being deployed to disseminate Western ideas of civilisation. The American Presbyterian missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin used ‘elegant’ [文雅] to translate ‘civilisation’ in Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law* (1863). The Chinese translation of *Homely Words to Aid Governance* (1885) rendered ‘civilisation’ as ‘arts and letters’ [文教]. At this stage, the missionaries’ strategy for ‘civilising’ the Chinese was primarily that of adapting the Western concept of ‘civilisation’ to traditional Chinese thinking.

A search through the famous dictionaries of this period yields a similar finding. Prior to the Hundred-Day Reform [戊戌維新] of 1898, no English-Chinese dictionaries – be they those compiled by the Chinese or the missionaries – gave 文明 as the Chinese term for ‘civilisation’. Most of them used ‘refined and cultivated’ [教化] instead. The word ‘civilisation’ did not appear in the *English and Chinese Lexicon* compiled by Kwong Tsün Fuk. The *English and Chinese Dictionary* [字典匯集] compiled by Tam Tat Hin [譚達軒] rendered ‘civilisation’ as ‘to educate with manners, cultivation, politeness, and elegance’ [教以禮儀、教化之事、禮貌、文雅] (145)<sup>14</sup>. The Chinese at this point conflated civilisation with culture and used them both in an atemporal sense, in a way more faithful to the ancient meanings of *wenming* and *wenhua* than the temporalised meaning of ‘Civilisation’ in the West.

It is evident from the above that the Western concept ‘Civilisation’ failed to gain access to the Chinese consciousness for a very long time even after the Opium Wars, and the bending of the classical Chinese term *wenming* to translate ‘civilisation’ came even later. Especially worth noting is that whenever the term *wenming* was used in late Qing, it continued to be used as a counter-concept to *yeman* (barbarism) – in keeping with the meaning of the term in ancient Chinese texts. Also, when *wenming* was finally used to refer to ‘civilisation’, it was often used interchangeably with *wenhua*, both being non-temporal concepts, as they were in classical Chinese texts. In other words, prior to the First Sino-Japanese War, *wenming* remained primarily a classical Chinese concept.

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13. The translators obviously did not distinguish between ‘*wenhua*’ (culture) and ‘*wenming*’ (civilisation) at this point. This is not surprising. *Wenming* and *wenhua* were very similar and basically interchangeable in classical Chinese, both being atemporal concepts.

14. Acknowledgement for this information is due to Huang Xingtao and Fang Weigui.

*Wenming* used in a Western sense – that is, temporalised to convey progress – burgeoned with great popularity as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War. China's loss of this war was the last straw that galvanised the country into confronting her own inadequacies. The loss to Japan did not just change China's spatial concept – the fact that she was not the 'Centre of the World'. More importantly, her loss to her once subservient neighbour finally shocked her into taking seriously a linear temporal concept in which she saw herself as falling behind different nations in world history, and in which she might become the victim of 'natural selection'<sup>15</sup> if she did not try to catch up with the West. This was how the temporal dimension of 'Civilisation' finally became understood by the Chinese literati, and the temporalisation of *wenming* to translate 'civilisation' became accepted by many Chinese elites.

*Wenming* with the modern semantics started appearing frequently in newspapers and in petitions for reform. It became a widely accepted term at least among those abreast of current affairs – especially the reformists and activists such as Kang Youwei [康有為], Liang Qichao [梁啟超], Yan Fu [嚴復], Tan Sitong [譚嗣同], Tang Caichang [唐才常] and Zhang Taiyan [章太炎]. Even the conservative Ye Dehui [葉德輝] started using the term in a modern sense. Significantly enough, most people who used the term this way approved of the values it embodied, and acknowledged the superiority of the West and Japan with which the term was associated. The adoption of the term reflected Chinese identification with its values; it also effected and enhanced that identification.

There were, however, two kinds of receptions of *wenming* that were associated with two distinct movements after the war – the Self-Strengthening Movement and the Hundred-Day Reform.

### ***The Self-Strengthening Movement [洋務運動] or [自強運動] (1861-95)***

Between 1861 and 1895, scholars and government officials such as Feng Guifen [馮桂芬], Xue Fucheng [薛福成] and Zhang Zhidong [張之洞] advocated adopting Western technologies while maintaining traditional Chinese social and political structures. This principle, first proposed by Feng in 1861<sup>16</sup>, was most famously summed up by Zhang's 1898 formula 'Chinese learning as the guiding principle (*ti*); Western learning for practical utility (*yong*)' [中學為體, 西學為用] (Zhidong 176). That is to say,

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15. The Chinese espoused a highly colonialistic version of social Darwinism, under the influence of Yan Fu's interpretation and selective translation of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*.

16. Feng is generally credited with being the first person to formally explore this idea, urging an approach that would take 'Chinese ethics as the foundation, and enrich it with other nations' techniques and methods for self-enhancement and self-augmentation' [以中國之倫常名教為原本, 輔以諸國富強之朮] (211).

Chinese statesmen and scholars<sup>17</sup> began to maintain two concepts of time, based on two understandings of *wenming*: they held on to the atemporal ancient Chinese *wenming* in the domain of non-materialistic matters such as ethics and politics, but also began to acknowledge the need to adopt a temporalised Western *wenming* when it came to matters of science and technology. In other words, officials involved in the Self-Strengthening Movement continued to regard ancient Chinese wisdom as having abiding authority across space and time over perennial issues. Nonetheless, they pushed for adopting Western science and military technology, and hence a series of efforts were made in China to build shipyards and arsenals, to hire foreign advisors on such matters, and to translate and pursue Western learning<sup>18</sup>. Basic industries, communications and transportation were developed, and the military modernised, on the principle of grafting Western technology onto Chinese institutions.

*Ti-yong* [體用] was a Buddhist concept (later also adopted by Neo-Confucianism), with *ti* referring to the essence and *yong* to the function and the use. The differences between the two can also be articulated as the underlying, unchanging substance as opposed to that which is in motion. Technology can be outdated, while truth is timeless. For the Reformists, Chinese learning was associated with atemporal truth, whereas the brilliance of Western learning was temporal – it was a movement that would inevitably become outdated, but it was nonetheless useful for helping China to move forward in the meantime. In a culture which had for centuries prioritised the internal over the external, morality over efficiency and integrity over utility, it is unsurprising that advocates of this doctrine continued to regard the Chinese ‘civilisation’ as superior. Zhang Zhidong and those who shared his outlook continued to value ‘atemporal wisdom’ over ‘temporal tools’ – a legacy that had flourished especially under Buddhism with its view that time and change were illusions. The global outlook of these thinkers was that the intelligence and wisdom of the Chinese civilisation were superior to those of the West, and that by adopting Western technology, China would eventually prevail over colonial bullies. People in this camp were thus generally uninterested in any social reform beyond economic and military modernisation.

### ***The Hundred-Day Reformists*<sup>19</sup> and Yan Fu [嚴復]**

Following China’s defeat by France in Indochina in 1885, more and more literati came to understand that changes more fundamental than

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17. Chinese ministers and scholars were often one and the same due to the Confucian tradition of recruiting by imperial examination.

18. Translations of major Western works had been undertaken since the 1840s – that is, after the first Opium War.

19. The Hundred-Day Reform lasted from 11 June to 21 September 1898.

those prescribed by the Self-Strengthening Movement would be necessary to save China. There was a growing feeling that China needed ‘basic Western *wenming*’ (a reformed infrastructure, including a new governmental model, educational system and improved commerce) to support ‘scientific *wenming*’ [科學文明] (technological development). Unlike the Self-Strengtheners, this group tended to espouse a linear progressive understanding of *wenming* not only in science but also in politics. This should not be surprising. The most prominent of these intellectuals – Yan Fu and the Hundred-Day Reformists – were heavily influenced by social Darwinism and its ideology of ‘survival of the fittest’, hence their understanding of *wenming* was strongly temporalised, as was its corresponding term ‘civilisation’ in the West. It was no coincidence that the most important places in which *wenming* with modern Western semantics was popularised were the works of Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, and the *Journal of Current Affairs* [時務報]. *Current Affairs* was the mouthpiece of the Hundred-Day Reformists, and Liang was one of its major contributors.

With a more thorough vision of reform than the Self-Strengtheners, the Reformists and Yan Fu avidly championed not just *wenming* technology such as the railroad and Western mathematics, but also democracy, civil institutions, police structure and even modern Western time-consciousness and its related custom of making and keeping appointments. Liang Qichao used the term *wenming* to promote not only technological but also social and political reforms – democracy and the rule of law, but also questions such as hygiene, feminism and education. Thus, in Liang Qichao’s ‘An Open Letter to Mr. Yan Yiuling’ [與嚴幼陵先生書] (1897) the inevitable triumph of democracy in human history is stressed, and China is urged to practice democracy in order to become *wenming* – that is, civilised:

Democracy has not always been the practice of all nations since classical antiquity, and China is no exception. Over the past hundred years, however, popular sovereignty has gained much ground in the West, hence the rise of the West. If China would start adopting such practice, she would be equal to the West in several decades, and civilised (*wenming*) in a hundred years. (108-109)

Liang also understood a rational legal system to be part and parcel of civilised society. In March 1898, he argued that the degree of a country’s *wenming* could be measured in terms of its success in establishing a fair, open and precise legal system (‘The Chinese Society Should Adopt Legal Thinking’ [論中國宜講求法律之學], 93-94).

Another clear sign of Liang’s identification of *wenming* with ‘Civilisation’ was his advocacy of feminism (as a *wenming* practice in his famous ‘Petition for Reform’ [變法通議] of 1896. Not surprisingly, Liang deemed education to be inseparable from *wenming*, and in his ‘Preface to

Shen Xue's *Universal System*' [沈氏音書序] he criticised China's mass illiteracy as incommensurable with her pride in her *wenming*: 'China is well-known among the five continents for her *wenming* (being civilised). Yet there aren't even thirty people who can read among every one hundred' [中國以文明號于五洲, 而百人中識字者, 不及三十人] (37). In relation to education, Liang's contemporaries began to view learned societies, public libraries and widely-circulating newspapers as signs of how civilised a society was. Learned societies began to mushroom not long after Liang's promotion of a Westernised concept of *wenming*<sup>20</sup>. Attention also turned to public educational facilities. In *Public Newspaper on All Nations* [萬國公報], Lu Hanzhang [盧愨章] linked the strength of the West to its public libraries: 'Public libraries educate both the rich and the poor, male and female, the young and the old, for which reason the flourishing or stifling of talents is related directly to the number of libraries and bears on the fate of a nation' [公書庫則富貴貧賤、男女老少, 無不培植, 故人才之得失, 關乎書庫之多少, 關乎國家之盛衰。歐美文明之國, 人才眾多, 邦國富強, 屬地廣大, 莫不由是而至也] (quoted in Wang 115). In the same vein, Tan Sitong linked the lack of interest in journals and newspapers to a society's backwardness in his complaint to Tang Caichang: '[t]he society's closed-mindedness and backwardness is such that the *Journal of Current Affairs* sold only 200 copies in Nanjing' [金陵銷《時務報》僅及二百份, 蓋風氣之通塞、文化之啟閉, 其差數亦如此也] (quoted in Cai 262).

The fact that conceptual change can both reflect and effect social and political changes is evident here. As mentioned before, Liang was one of the most important popularisers of the westernised, temporalised usage of *wenming*. Especially significant is, with Liang and the popularisation of this new concept, modern Western values became accepted by Chinese society, and the Chinese intelligentsia increasingly resorted to the modern sense of *wenming* to think about reform issues. The growing popularity of learned societies and newspapers provided some examples of how modern Western values began to occupy Chinese minds along with the saturation of *wenming* with Western semantics<sup>21</sup>.

Another equally (if not more) influential populariser of a temporalised concept of *wenming* was Yan Fu. Yan was important due to his prominent role as a translator of Western thought, and in particular his translation of texts relating to evolutionism – hence his special sensitivity to Western time-consciousness and his solid understanding of the temporal dimension of 'Civilisation' (which he generally translated as *kaihua* [開化]). Adopting the West's linear concept of time, Yan in an essay in early 1895 contrasted the West to China as 'forward-looking' versus 'backward-

20. See especially Zhang for a discussion of these developments.

21. Acknowledgment is due to Huang Xingtao and Fang Weigui for their provision of rich lists of examples on which I draw in making this argument.

looking' ('On the Urgent Need for Changes' [論世變之亟]). In May of the same year, he again emphasised that China had to choose between reform or subjugation, and urged China to engage in serious self-reflection regarding a number of practices considered by the West to be backward and uncivilised – practices such as footbinding, castration and torture ('Urgent Words on Saving China from Subjugation' [救亡決論]). His criticism of Chinese customs made evident that his understanding of 'Civilisation' was by no means confined to technology. Perhaps the text where Yan's introduction of the temporalised notion of 'Civilisation' made its greatest impact on Chinese society was his famous 1897 translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* [天演論] – a translation in which Yan tied *wenming* to evolutionism.

### ***The New Culture Movement (1915-1921) and 4 May 1919***

The Reformists' embrace of a temporalised concept of *wenming* was radicalised by the May Fourth Movement which rejected the Chinese tradition wholesale in favour of a modernised, Westernised and 'civilised' China – the three adjectives being synonyms. On 4 May 1919, a mass student protest broke out against the Chinese government's weak response to the Treaty of Versailles. Two decades' devotion to Western and Japanese learning had created in the intellectuals a feeling of frustration with traditional Chinese morality, family structure and Confucianism, all of which were blamed for causing China to lag behind the West. The Chinese nationalists called for a wholesale rejection of traditional values and the regeneration of Chinese culture through adopting practices associated with Western civilisation, especially democracy and science. Not surprisingly, one of the main tenets of this movement was an 'orientation toward the future rather than the past' – fully in line with the ideology underpinning 'Civilisation' during this era<sup>22</sup>.

Intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement launched a complete denunciation of both the materialistic and the spiritual aspects of Chinese civilisation. In extreme cases, traditional Chinese culture was condemned not simply as 'half-civilised' but even as 'anti-civilisation', with the old traditions taking the blame for obstructing China's path to becoming civilised. Thus, Lu Xun described the feudalistic tradition as 'cannibalistic'. Chinese intellectuals at this point thoroughly embraced and enthusiastically promoted *wenming* in a Western temporalised sense, in place of its former atemporal meaning.

Chen Duxiu [陳獨秀], a major figure in the May Fourth Movement, declared the hallmarks of modern *wenming* to be: 1) human rights, 2)

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22. Other tenets of this movement included the championing of vernacular literature and democratic values, an end to patriarchy, a rejection of the superiority of Confucian culture and a critical examination of the Chinese classics.

evolutionism and 3) socialism. In addition, only the ‘European *wenming*’ could be called modern. Like most intellectuals of his time, Chen eagerly embraced and advocated a Westernised and temporalised concept of *wenming*. The Chinese term was by now saturated with Western semantics. What conceptual history can tell us is: the occupation was not limited to any particular concept alone. Semantics took root in an entire cultural consciousness. The history of concepts could lay bare the origins and developments of ideologies. After the May Fourth Movement, the colonisation of *wenming* by ‘civilisation’ became part and parcel of the colonisation of many other aspects of the Chinese people’s daily life and values. The popular Chinese consciousness became very much preoccupied with the Western valorisation of progress and modernity. Luo Jianqiu [羅檢秋] pointed out that many Western inventions characterised as ‘barbaric’ [夷] or ‘from overseas’ [洋] in the nineteenth century were rebaptised as ‘civilised’ (*wenming*) by the very end of the Qing Dynasty. Thus, bicycles, automobiles, electrical appliances, apartment buildings, sofas, eyeglasses and so on were all redefined as ‘civilised’ (*wenming*) apparatuses [文明器具]. Car-racing, horse-racing, ball games, and swing were named ‘civilised (*wenming*) diversions’ [文明遊戲]. Tap water, banks, telephones, the police and Western restaurants all became symbols of a civilised lifestyle. Western-style marriages, burials and manners all acquired the prefix ‘civilised’ (*wenming*), as in the phrase ‘*wenming* marriages’.

### **From *wenming* versus Civilisation to *wenming* as Civilisation: new conceptual tools for understanding China’s changing relations with the West**

Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of *Begriffsgeschichte* opens new perspectives for rethinking translation studies and International Relations. At the same time, the complexity of China’s changing relations with Western colonial powers makes it necessary to go beyond Koselleck’s theory of ‘asymmetrical counter-concepts’.

Under the influence of Carl Schmitt, Koselleck tends to approach the human world (which he calls ‘the historical world’) from the standpoint of ‘friend versus enemy’. In the process, he overlooks many other possible structures for human relationships. For Koselleck, ‘the historical world [...] operates for the most part with asymmetrical concepts’ which ‘deny the reciprocity of mutual recognition’ and are ‘unequally antithetical’ (2013, 156):

From the concept of the one party follows the definition of the alien other, which definition can appear to the latter as a linguistic deprivation, in actuality verging on theft. This involves asymmetrically opposed concepts. The opposite is not equally antithetical. The linguistic usage of politics,

like that of everyday life, is permanently based on this fundamental figure of asymmetric opposition. (2013, 156)

Like many post-structuralists, Koselleck is wary of the power hierarchy established by binary oppositions. Unlike his French contemporaries, however, Koselleck's focus is not binary opposites in particular but the notion of concepts in general.

Stepping outside the Schmittean frame of mind, one can see that concepts do not necessarily have to relate to each other in a binary manner, as in the opposition between 'friend' and 'enemy'. Other conceptual combinations are possible, such as parallel concepts, complimentary concepts or competing concepts. By extending Koselleck's theory in the manner described above, it becomes possible to put forward more precise and nuanced analyses of international relations – a subject whose complexity resists containment within the rigid framework of counter-concepts. The case of the decline and re-emergence of China on the world stage since the Opium Wars offers a fine example of the potential of this analytical method, as it is a history which can by no means be explained solely in terms of counter-concepts.

After the Opium Wars, China receded from being a master concept in the world into being a non-concept. When China rejoined the United Nations, at first she existed merely as a parallel concept to other nations. With her gradual rise, however, China evolved into a competing concept among major world powers, as was evident whenever other nations had to choose between building diplomatic ties with China or with China's 'enemies'. On occasions such as the 6<sup>th</sup> East Asian Summit, China even presented herself as a counter-concept to the world's superpower – that is, the United States. To the extent that conceptual changes reflect social-historical changes, China's evolution from a parallel concept to a competing concept in relation to the West, mirrors the country's rise on the world stage.

Particularly worth noting is that, in the twenty-first century, China has even evolved into a counter-concept to the United States. The China versus the US scenario at the 6<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit can be read productively by deploying a *Begriffsgeschichte* method, albeit with an enlarged conceptual frame that breaks the confines of Koselleck's asymmetrical counter-concept. Again, it must be emphasised that concepts do not merely reflect but can also effect social and political changes. Thus, China's changing roles on the world stage have been to a certain extent a product of China's own strategic management of what kind of concept she chooses for herself in relation to other nations in different contexts. Despite many countries' perceptions of China as a competing concept or even a counter-concept to themselves, China appeases them by overtly projecting herself as merely their parallel concept – as is evident in

her repeated assurances to other countries of her desire to coexist harmoniously with others and that her rise will not affect any other nation. In diplomatic situations that require a strong stance, however, China deliberately asserts herself as a counter-concept to nations such as Japan.

This analytical model might also be applied to the reception history of *wenming* as the translation for ‘civilisation’ set out above, and to examine how this history carries within itself the imprint of China’s decline on the world stage between the First Opium War and the May Fourth Movement, and the efforts of the Chinese people to interpret and cope with that decline. This reception history might be concisely summarised as a movement from *wenming* versus Civilisation to *wenming* as Civilisation.

For centuries, the Chinese had believed in their cultural superiority, but there was no concept in classical Chinese comparable to the Western notion of ‘Civilisation’. *Wenming*, the term later adopted as the translation for ‘civilisation’, originally referred to the virtues of a person or a society. Western civilisation and the Western notion of Civilisation were simply *non-concepts* for the pre-modern Chinese.

Even after China’s defeat in the First Opium War, the Chinese people’s ingrained belief in their country’s cultural superiority initially rendered it difficult for them to think otherwise. It was not until the twentieth century that ‘civilisation’ would enter into the dictionaries in China, and that *wenming* would be accepted as its Chinese translation, even though the acknowledgement of the superiority of Western technology arrived much sooner among the Chinese elites. For at least three decades after the First Opium War, Western concepts and ideas were not even considered to be parallel to Chinese thought, and they were certainly not considered to be competing or counter-concepts.

The First Sino-Japanese War finally awakened the Chinese elites to the urgency of learning from the advanced technology of ‘Western *wenming*’ in order to avoid subjugation. However, even then the Chinese elites would acknowledge Western superiority only in technology. The Self-Strengtheners who advocated ‘Chinese learning as the guiding principle; Western learning for practical utility’ recognised Western civilisation as a competitor against Chinese *wenming*, with the Chinese being superior in spiritual and ethical matters but Western civilisation being ahead in science and technology. The pluralistic understanding of the concept of *wenming* that was promoted by the Self-Strengtheners was quickly stifled as part of the complete occupation of *wenming* by the temporality of Western semantics. By the time of the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese had whole-heartedly embraced ‘Civilisation’ in the collective singular as promoted and represented by the West. Given that only one standard – the Western standard – was accepted for measuring how advanced any society is, the old Chinese civilisation was no longer

referred to as *wenming*, but dismissed instead as the asymmetrical counter-concept of ‘Civilisation’, so much so that 5000 years of Chinese civilisation – material *and* spiritual – was sweepingly condemned as ‘counter-Civilisation’ or ‘anti-Civilisation’.

In the past three decades, with the increasing return of the Chinese people’s confidence in their own cultural traditions (such as the rehabilitation of Confucianism), the old Chinese civilisation is acknowledged once again as *wenming*. ‘Classical Chinese *wenming*’ re-entered the world stage, usually in the form of a parallel concept to Western civilisation. On occasions, it would be upheld as a competing concept and even counter-concept to the over-materialistic Western civilisation. With China’s repeated emphasis on its peaceful rise in the world, the older Chinese meaning of *wenming*, as defined by Wang Bai – that is the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might is the proper human order (*wen*) – has been gradually restored.

## Semantic changes and politics

### *Radical Semantic Changes Indicative of a Nation in Crisis*

A good conceptual historian must be savvy at deciphering the social-political changes behind semantic changes of the kind described in this article. Significantly, the radical change in the semantics of *wenming* took place precisely when China underwent an unprecedented loss of its traditional sense of cultural superiority – that is, at around the time of the May Fourth Movement. As late as the Self-Strengthening Movement, the elites who were the most aware of world affairs still remained unshaken in their faith as to the superiority of traditional Chinese culture. The May Fourth Movement marked the turning point in Chinese history when the Chinese for the first time ever underwent a complete loss of faith in their own culture. *Wenming*, a positive term, was emptied of its traditional atemporal semantics, and was invested instead with the highly temporalised semantics of ‘Civilisation’.

From the increasing takeover of the Chinese term *wenming* by Western semantics – a takeover that culminated in the transformation of that term into a ‘World Criterion’ used by the Chinese during the May Fourth Movement to condemn pre-modern China as ‘anti-Civilisation’. Drawing on the analysis presented above of the civilising process as a mode of domination, the increasing domination of China by Europe can also be described in terms of the gradual conquest of China by the concept of ‘Civilisation’ in the collective singular. The history of the rise of the collective singular in Europe is also instructive for understanding the political significance of the Chinese people’s eventual subscription to the idea of ‘Civilisation’. As Melvin Richter explains:

Under the systems of estates and orders characteristic of pre-revolutionary Europe, political and social concepts tended to be specific and particularistic, referring in the plural to well-defined social gradations and privileges such as the liberties of the *Bürger* (citizens) of a city [...]. But beginning in the eighteenth century, those older terms remaining in use began to become more general in their social reference, more abstract in meaning, and hence took the linguistic form of ‘isms’ or singular nouns like ‘liberty’, which replaced such prior usages in the plural as ‘liberties’, or ‘history’, which replaced previously discrete narrations. (125)

The rise of the collective singular in Europe during the *Sattelzeit*, however, by no means signified that modernity was a period of global consensus. Far from being a period of universal agreement, modernity was characterised by an explosion of ideas and competing viewpoints, with each school and idea vying to universalise its particular will and to achieve a position of dominance.

The development of the collective singular inside European nations took inspiration from the increasing erosion of the estates and other local authorities by a central state. Colonialism transposed this hierarchy between the central and the local to the international scene. The conquest of non-European nations such as China by ‘Civilisation’ in the collective singular signified the erosion of the multiplicity of cultural voices by the Master Civilisation. Koselleck’s observation about the power politics involved in the developments of collective singulars inside individual European nations is equally applicable to international power politics: ‘a given group makes an exclusive claim to generality, applying a linguistically universal concept to itself alone and rejecting all comparisons’ (2013, 156).

It should be noted that ‘Civilisation’ was itself an offshoot of ‘(World) History’, with both concepts in turn intimately tied to ‘Progress’. During the *Sattelzeit*, ‘History’ also became a collective singular ‘encompassing the totality of histories and projecting them onto a larger shared scenario for human action through the course of centuries’ (Sebastián 122). Likewise, ‘Progress’ ‘[became] a transhistorical term and a factor full of temporal potential for *legitimizing historical-political projects*’ (Pankakoski 17, italics mine) – the projects collected together under the notion of the ‘White Man’s Burden’ by Rudyard Kipling. Koselleck points out how ‘[t]he contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, initially a result of overseas expansion, became a basic framework for the *progressive construction for the growing unity of world history*’ (2013, 246, italics mine). ‘Civilisation’ was the tool for that construction.

Concepts can shape the world in a particular direction. As a collective singular imposing standardisation and normalisation, ‘Civilisation’ can itself transform peoples and cultures of the world into collective singulars. This operation is typically performed by either excluding or converting

the non-conforming elements<sup>23</sup>, with the ‘inconvertibles’ being denied human and civilised treatments<sup>24</sup>, and thus massacres and brutality could coexist with European Civilisation. Thomas Boutonnet’s analysis of the predicament of the subalterns inside the nation during the civilising process can be appropriated to describe the predicament of the subalterns under colonialism:

These moral and social standards and practices, to which the whole population is expected to conform, constitutes a civilising and normalising process that expels those whose behaviours or moral standards do not comply with the social order to the margins of [the world]<sup>25</sup>. This process distances those who can’t be part of the [international] community, but it also exercises a centripetal normalising force capable of bringing those who were sent to, or were considered part of, the periphery back to the centre of the social space. (Boutonnet 85)

Primarily a standardisation process, ‘civilisation aims at creating a homogenised space that feeds political concepts and ideologies’ (Boutonnet 85).

Given that ‘Civilisation’ was more or less interchangeable with ‘the West’, once *wenming* was made into the Chinese equivalent for ‘Civilisation’, it was no longer a mere counter-concept to *yeman*<sup>26</sup>. The binary pair *wenming/yeman* (civilised/barbaric) carries within it another binary pair: the West/the non-West. Henceforward, *wenming* was no longer a mere counter-concept to uncivilised; it had also become conscripted as a counter-concept to the non-West. Koselleck observes that the creation of counter-concepts in the modern West was a political act.

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23. Universalism has a much longer and stronger tradition in Chinese and Indian thoughts than in the West. However, there are major differences between Chinese and European universalisms. Take, for example, the pre-modern Chinese concept *wenming*. Pre-modern China had no interest in or will for universalising their idea of *wenming* through conquest or conversion (wars were fought, of course, but for other reasons); nor was there a political agenda associated with *wenming* in ancient Chinese texts such as *Shangshu*. Furthermore, the Chinese did not deem themselves as having a monopoly on *wenming*. *Wenming* is a state of being that must be cultivated, and hence any person or any society deemed cultivated could be called *wenming*. A foreigner (‘barbarian’) would be regarded as *wenming* if s/he was cultivated, as much as a Chinese without cultivation would be deemed barbaric. Confucius himself advised: ‘Since we have lost our cultivations, we must learn it from the foreigners/barbarians’ [禮失求諸野] (recorded in both Liu Qin’s [劉歆] *Seven Categories* [七略] and Ban Gu’s [班固] ‘On Arts and Letters’ [藝文志] in *Hanshu* [漢書]).

24. Even the ‘convertibles’ were never accorded full human and civilised treatments, because they were ‘not white/not quite’, as Homi Bhabha puts it (66).

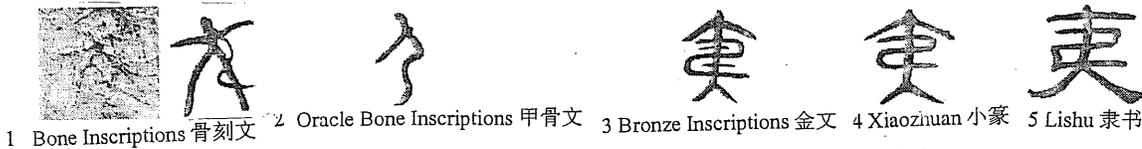
25. ‘The world’ is substituted for ‘the nation’, and the ‘international’ for the ‘national’ community, in order to apply Boutonnet’s reading of the civilising project operated by the nation-state to the same kind of project operated by the colonial state.

26. The notion *yeman* (a rough equivalent of ‘barbaric’) already existed in Chinese. However, its contrasting concept was not ‘civilised’ but ‘cultivated’.

By translating into Chinese such creation, the Chinese transferred over its politics also.

*Counter-concept substitutions and the reshuffling of power hierarchy*

Counter-concepts can be used to scrutinise the reshuffling of power in another manner – that is, by studying the substitutions of counter-concepts over time. *Wenming/yeman* (civilised/barbaric), for example, emerged in the Chinese language around the May Fourth Movement to displace an earlier binary pair *Yi/Xia* [夷/夏]. As the first image (reading from the right) of the following figure displaying the evolution of the character *Yi* shows, the character was derived from an ideogram signifying a human being carrying a bow<sup>27</sup>:



1 Bone Inscriptions 骨刻文 2 Oracle Bone Inscriptions 甲骨文 3 Bronze Inscriptions 金文 4 Xiaozhuan 小篆 5 Lishu 隶书

*Yi* was originally used to designate ‘the Easterners’ (that is, those living east of the Mainlanders). Due to their ‘bow-bearing’ lifestyle, the *Yis* were deemed as unrefined, pugnacious, and ignorant of the importance and the art of harmonious coexistence with others – all traits deemed barbaric by the Mainlanders. The word later came to designate all the ‘barbaric’ Eastern tribes, and even generalised from time to time to refer vaguely to any ‘foreigner’. The derogatory overtone of *Yi* was further augmented when it was set in binary opposition to *Xia* – the latter expression being derived from the Xia Dynasty. According to *Zuozhuan*, the name *Huaxia* [华夏] was first used during the ancient *Xia* [夏] Dynasty, when propriety was highly regarded, to refer to the whole country of China as a refined culture, where *xia* [夏] meant ‘great’ or ‘grand’ and *hua* [華] described the ‘illustrious and splendid clothing’ that the ancient Chinese wore. *Huaxia* [华夏] was then used by subsequent dynasties in a broader sense to refer to the country with a splendid culture. The binary pair *Yi/Xia* came to stand in for another pair of contrasting concepts ‘barbaric’/‘cultivated’<sup>28</sup>, with the Chinese representing refinement and cultivation, and foreigners representing the barbaric. However, with the replacement of *Yi/Xia* by *wenming/yeman* at around the time of the May Fourth Movement, the

27. The figure is taken from the *Baidu Encyclopedia* (<http://baike.baidu.com/picview/36614/36614/0/b58f8c5494eef01f50e507ece1fe9925bc317d21.html#albumindex=0&picindex=0>). The following etymological sequence for *Yi* is proposed here: 5 Lishu 隶书; 4 Xiaozhuan 小篆; 3 Bronze Inscriptions 金文; 2 Oracle Bone Inscriptions 甲骨文; 1 Bone Inscriptions 骨刻文, followed by a photograph of 1.

28. The term ‘contrasting concepts’ is deliberately used here in place of ‘counter-concepts’. Strictly speaking, counter-concepts in the Western sense did not really exist in pre-modern Chinese culture, due to the fact that *yang* already contains within itself the *yin* and vice versa. Thus, the ‘barbarians’ were capable of becoming cultivated, just as the Chinese themselves could become barbaric if they commit barbaric practices.

attribute ‘barbaric’ shifted from characterising ‘the foreigners’ to ‘the Chinese’ themselves. In order to redeem themselves, it became necessary for the Chinese to create another counter-concept: this time the counter-concept being no longer ‘foreign cultures’, but ‘the old Chinese culture’ against which a modern China – a new China more commensurable with the (Western) notion of ‘Civilisation’, needed to be created. Interestingly enough, the newly invented counter-concepts ‘old feudalistic China’/‘New Modern China’ were made possible in the first place by the Chinese embrace of a Western linear concept of time.

### **Conclusion: translation and the restructuring of Chinese foreign policy**

The semantic change in *wenming* from being incommensurable with the materialistic and temporal dimensions of ‘Civilisation’ to being made identical with it as a result of translation, coupled with the substitution of the contrasting concepts *Yi/Xia* by the counter-concepts *wenming/yeman*, had an enduring impact on how China reinvented herself and on the kind of image that ‘the New China’ sought to project on the world stage.

Before China’s embrace of Western values, *wenming* and ‘Civilisation’ embodied different sets of cultural ideals in the East and in the West. The ideal pursued by the pre-modern Chinese for human beings and society were spiritual cultivation and harmony with the universe – which included harmony with nature and other human beings. Technology was not included as part of *wenming*. *Wenming* was also counter-posed to conquest: ‘the elucidation of the cosmic order (*wenming*) rather than cowering with might [威武] is the proper human order’ (Wang Bai). Pugnaciousness and the love of conquest were deemed ‘barbaric’ and associated with the *Yis*<sup>29</sup>. Nor was there a temporal schema underpinning *wenming* urging ‘the cultivated’ to conquer and convert ‘the uncultivated’. ‘Civilisation’, on the other hand, celebrated ‘advancements in comfort, increased material possessions and personal luxuries, improved education techniques, “cultivation of the arts and sciences”, and the expansion “of commerce and industry”’ (Starobinski 3). The linear temporality grounding ‘Civilisation’ practically turned the urge to conquer and to ‘civilise’ the non-Europeans into a mission and a moral obligation of the White Man. The May Fourth Movement’s rejection of the old meaning of *wenming* in favour of making the term the Chinese ‘equivalent’ of ‘Civilisation’, no less than the substitution of *Yi/Xia* by *wenming/yeman* in the modern Chinese language, reflected a radical change in Chinese

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29. Even the famous Emperor Wu of Han [漢武帝] – the first emperor who significantly expanded the Chinese territory, was repeatedly criticized by historians for coveting glory and conquests [好大喜功].

values. Above all, in both cases, conceptual changes helped bring about a turning point in Chinese social values and Chinese foreign policy.

Once *wenming* was standardised as the translation for ‘Civilisation’, military might and commercial expansion became core concepts of, rather than contrasting concepts to, *wenming*. The May Fourth Movement’s realignment of positive semantics with ‘Civilisation’ and ‘the foreign’, and negative semantics with ‘the old *wenming*’ and ‘feudalistic China’, removed certain old inhibitions (such as the association of the use of force with barbarism), opened up a new realm of action and turned Chinese society and international politics in a new direction. This semantic reassignment of positive values to ‘Civilisation’ and negative values to feudalistic *wenming* lent legitimacy to the New China’s revolt against its over 2000 years’ prioritisation of spiritual cultivation, and steered the nation toward urgent projects of scientific and military modernisation – a legacy that reached its feverish peak during the Cold War Period as Communist China came under the pressure of both the USA and the USSR. Hence the relentless purging of Confucianism and all traditional Chinese thinking during the Cultural Revolution in pursuit of reckless and even unrealistic aspirations of modernisation. Hence also China’s complete turning of her back on her pre-modern prioritisation of harmonising with nature, in favour of relentless modernisation even at the expense of the environment. Furthermore, it was during the Cultural Revolution, when condemnation of feudalistic thinking reached its peak, that China abandoned its thousands of years’ belief in harmonising with others as the highest good (Confucius) and the best strategy (Sunzi), and instead adopted a pronounced belligerent attitude toward its enemies – a belligerence which in feudalistic China would have been deemed barbaric. The adoption of Western semantics through translation, in other words, fundamentally transformed the Chinese *Weltanschauung*, impacting even the way in which people relate to each other in modern Chinese society, and the way in which modern China relates to other nations on the world stage.

Of course, China’s repeated losses on the battlefield from the First Opium War to the First Sino-Japanese War had already shaken the country into the Self-Strengthening Movement, with its calls for the modernisation of technology. However, without a change in semantics – made possible by the May Fourth Movement’s wholesale condemnation of traditional Chinese values and its reinterpretation of *wenming* with Western semantics – ‘the New China’ could not have gained complete ‘freedom’, legitimacy and normative grounding to pursue the project of a ‘New and Strong China’ in a belligerent manner at the expense of harmony and spiritual cultivation. To appropriate Koselleck’s observations, one could say that the May Fourth Movement’s establishment of a new *wenming* as a counter-concept to the old *wenming*

violated the old *wenming*'s authority and its disproportionate prioritisation of the spiritual above the material, and as such allowed China new action and practice, thereby moving the country into a new phase of its history:

Concepts employable in a particularly antithetical manner have a marked tendency to *reshape the various relations and distinctions among groups, to some degree violating those concerned, and in proportion to this violation rendering them capable of political action.* (2013, 158, italics mine)

This statement is followed by Koselleck's observation that '[t]he recognition of such a dynamic requires that former linguistic usage must itself be placed in question' (2013, 158). In the argument set out in this article, the key concept whose former linguistic usage needed to be placed in question to enable the dynamics of the May Fourth Movement was the old *wenming*.

The last sentence in the quote just given from Koselleck is especially interesting: without semantic change, revolution in the sense of both social and political change would be impossible. Tradition lives through language. So long as language remained unchanged, the old social order persisted. That is why the Self-Strengtheners' efforts to modernise China were bound to fail. Only when *wenming* was fully accepted as the translation for 'Civilisation' – that is, only when *wenming* was fully occupied by Western semantics, was it possible for China to modernise herself without inhibitions or constraints. Translation injects new semantics into old expressions. This is why revolutions have always been accompanied by translation. This is also why China went through two linguistic revolutions in modern times.

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