

MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT BETWEEN CHINESE MODERNISATION AND CHINESE CIVILIZATION

Wang Xuebin¹

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ABSTRACT

Historical and cultural traditions constitute the foundation for building China into a great modern socialist country and rejuvenating the Chinese nation. As President Xi Jinping stated, “Chinese modernisation is a new mission for the Chinese nation, and it will allow Chinese civilization to shine with renewed radiance”. This indicates that, during the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, Chinese civilization and Chinese modernisation are by no means in opposition. On the one hand, what makes Chinese modernisation distinctly Chinese is its roots in Chinese civilization. On the other hand, the sustained vitality of Chinese civilization comes from the modern dynamism infused into it by Chinese modernisation. In this significant, all-encompassing process, the advancement of Chinese modernisation and the self-renewal of Chinese civilization are two inseparable dimensions that mutually reinforce each other. From the perspective of modernisation, the development of Chinese civilization is the harvest of modernisation, whereas Chinese civilization in turn nurtures and innovates upon modernisation itself.

Keywords: *Chinese Modernisation; Chinese Civilization; the Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.*

INTRODUCTION

In his speech at the Meeting on Cultural Inheritance and Development held on 2 June 2023, President Xi Jinping articulated the close connection between Chinese modernisation and Chinese civilization, “*Just as Chinese modernisation infuses Chinese civilization with modern vitality, the rich heritage of Chinese civilization bolsters Chinese modernisation*”. Building on the explorations and practices since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 – especially since the launch of the reform and opening up in the late 1970s – and through both theoretical and practical innovations since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, the CPC has successively advanced and expanded Chinese modernisation. This model of modernisation not only shares common features with those of other countries but also bears distinct characteristics shaped by China’s national conditions. By linking the historical roots of Chinese modernisation with the evolving trajectory of Chinese civilization, the aforesaid new conclusion made by President Xi reflects the CPC’s deepened understanding of its own development path.

It is particularly noteworthy that, at the meeting, President Xi emphasised, “*Chinese modernisation will breathe new life into this ancient land and see Chinese civilization shine with renewed radiance*”. The statement provides a valuable reference for understanding the intrinsic relationship between Chinese modernisation and Chinese civilization, a relationship that can be examined from the following three perspectives.

¹ Party School of the CPC Central Committee, China National Academy of Governance, a high-level think tank.
E-mail: jiakangccps2025@163.com.

Chinese civilization and Chinese modernisation are by no means in opposition.

As early as 2013, in a speech at the First Session of the 12th National People's Congress, President Xi made remarks regarding socialism with Chinese characteristics, noting, *"It is not an easy path. We are able to embark on this path thanks to the great endeavours of reform and opening up made in the past 30 years and more, the continuous quest made in the 60-plus years of the PRC, a thorough review of the evolution of the Chinese nation in its 170-plus years of modern history and carrying forward the 5,000-plus years of Chinese civilization. This path is deeply rooted in history and broadly based on China's present realities"*.

We explore the path of development and pursue modernisation through reflecting on the past and looking to the future. Modernisation is generally understood as transformative changes across various aspects of human society since the Industrial Revolution—a shift from traditional, agrarian structures to modern, industrial ones. As societies moved from pre-modern to modern, modernity gradually took shape and evolved. It must be acknowledged that Western countries, especially those in Europe and North America, were the first to embark on modernisation and remained at the forefront for an extended period.

However, this does not mean that modernisation is exclusive to the West; rather, it is a shared trend of human society. Nevertheless, under the long-standing influence and misguidance of Western discursive hegemony, many in the West—and even some in the developing world—tend to view China as a modern nation-state crafted by Western modernisation theories, instead of a country with over 5,000 years of history, making it challenging to truly comprehend China's past, present, and future. The prevalence of such views has long contributed to the spread of misguided thinking patterns such as the idea of "the immobile empire," the belief of traditional culture as an obstacle to modernisation, and the call for "total Westernisation". These narratives inevitably foster a rigid dichotomy between Chinese civilization and modernisation.

Today's China is built on the heritage of ancient China; today's Chinese culture has evolved from the country's cultural traditions; and today's pursuit of modernisation in China is a practice nourished by the deep roots of Chinese civilization. The Chinese nation has a distinctive cultural identity, and Chinese civilization is a self-sustaining system. As President Xi has stated, *"It is inevitable that China, a country with a unique culture, a unique history, and unique fundamental conditions, should choose a development path featuring its own characteristics"*. The CPC's decade-long emphasis on the roots, foundations, and heritage of Chinese civilization clearly demonstrates that Chinese civilization carries within itself the elements of modernity. This inherent modernity is the key to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

This is most vividly reflected in the distinguished continuity of Chinese civilization; one of the five defining characteristics of Chinese civilization outlined by President Xi at the Meeting on Cultural Inheritance and Development, where he highlighted that Chinese civilization is distinguished by its continuity, creativity, unity, inclusiveness, and peacefulness. Looking back at the history of humanity, it is evident that continuity is the most prominent feature that distinguishes Chinese civilization from Western civilization. The vast changes in dynasties, social formations, and ethnic compositions marking China's journey from a traditional society to a modern one have occurred within a civilizational continuum that has never undergone a radical disruption, unlike in the West.

Three perspectives deserve consideration in examining the construction of Chinese modernisation through the lens of distinguished continuity. The first perspective involves understanding the historical significance of Chinese modernisation within the broader history of the Chinese nation. From a perspective of historical materialism, the successful construction of Chinese modernisation represents how Chinese civilization has preserved and renewed itself through China's revolution, development, reform, and great changes in the new era.

The second perspective focuses on how Chinese civilization provides the historical foundation for the subjectivity of Chinese modernisation. As President Xi stressed, Chinese modernisation seeks to build upon China's ancient civilization; and it has developed within China. The unbroken continuity of Chinese civilization has long shaped a historical trajectory along which the Chinese nation is pursuing its unique path of modernisation. This undoubtedly constitutes the exclusive historical foundation for Chinese modernisation that features independence and subjectivity.

The third perspective illustrates how the profound cultural heritage accumulated throughout the history of Chinese civilization endows Chinese modernisation with its unique characteristics. For the time-honoured, extensive traditional Chinese culture, "amity and good neighbourliness is the principle guiding our interactions with other countries; and to deliver prosperity and security to the people is the overarching goal, to keep pace with the times through reform and innovation the abiding commitment, and to achieve harmony between man and nature the underlying philosophy."

Chinese civilization has formed unique core principles in terms of worldview, global vision, social values, moral values, concepts of civilization, and aesthetics. These principles, passed down and renewed through generations, have provided the Chinese nation with distinctive resources and significant advantages in its pursuit of modernisation. That is to say, the distinguished continuity transcends mere temporal and spatial spheres – it represents a deeper cultural continuity that defines the core historical significance, foundation, and characteristics of Chinese modernisation.

Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the CPC Central Committee has continuously advanced theoretical and practical innovation, including developing the key theoretical proposition and methodology of "*integrating the basic tenets of Marxism with the best of China's traditional culture*". As a crucial theory bridging ancient Chinese civilization with Marxism and the most powerful instrument for aligning Chinese civilization and Chinese modernisation, it has endowed the path of Chinese socialism with greater historical depth and broadened its cultural underpinnings.

What makes Chinese modernisation distinctly "Chinese" is its roots in civilization.

President Xi stated, "*A country's choice of path to modernisation is determined by its historical traditions, social systems, developmental conditions, and external environment, among other factors. As countries differ in their conditions, they may take different paths to modernisation. As we have seen, to achieve modernisation, a country must not only follow the general laws that apply; more importantly, it must keep in mind its own realities and distinctive characteristics*".

Since the path of Chinese socialism has been charted under the guidance of Marxism and built upon China's 5,000 years of civilization, Chinese modernisation must remain grounded in China's cultural heritage and profound civilization to achieve stable and sustained advancement. Its ethos also comes from Chinese civilization. The best of China's traditional culture has nurtured many concepts and principles, including promoting harmony between

humanity and nature; regarding the people as the foundation of the state; achieving harmony in diversity; discarding the outdated in favour of the new; ceaselessly pursuing self-improvement; embracing the world with virtue; governing by virtue; and pursuing common good for all. Featuring distinctive national characteristics and enduring contemporary relevance, these ideas constitute vital intellectual resources for Chinese modernisation.

This is exemplified in unity and peacefulness that distinguish Chinese civilization. Unity characterises Chinese civilization from national and ethnic perspectives, encompassing territorial, political, ethnic, and cultural unity. Peacefulness embodies the Chinese civilization's spiritual essence and mode of interaction, representing the fundamental principles that have guided the Chinese nation in handling its relations with the outside world throughout history. It is fair to say that unity and peacefulness have established deep historical foundations for rallying people's support and strength for Chinese modernisation and nurtured the concept of pursuing modernisation that benefits both China and the world.

On the one hand, the advantage of unity should be maximised in the pursuit of modernisation, given that the Chinese nation has always been a community with a shared future for all ethnic groups living in this country. The wholehearted support and collective efforts of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups are the fundamental driving force for the great achievements of Chinese modernisation. This necessitates effectively mobilising the creative initiative of all the Chinese people, while securing their fundamental interests. The philosophy of putting the people first constitutes the comparative advantage of Chinese modernisation, as well as the prerequisite for pooling the strength of people for innovation.

In the meantime, it is crucial to promote the concept of great unity and uphold the sense of community for the Chinese nation. In the collective endeavour toward Chinese modernisation, it is necessary to integrate Marxist ethnicity theories with China's specific realities and the best of its traditional culture, based on the long history of the Chinese nation. The historical and theoretical logic of the development of the Chinese nation must be followed when unravelling the rationale, principle and philosophy on the formation and development of the Chinese nation. More efforts should be made to facilitate the extensive exchange, interaction, and integration among all ethnic groups, driving Chinese modernisation through ethnic unity. The process of building China into a strong country and advancing national rejuvenation must involve extensive exchange, interaction, and integration among different ethnic groups, as well as the process in which all ethnic groups strive in unity and seek common prosperity and development.

Conversely, peacefulness underpins China's approach to modernisation that follows the path of peaceful development. Such an approach not only safeguards China's national interests, cultural identity, and sovereignty but also contributes to global peace and sustainability. China is committed to a path of modernisation that emphasises peaceful development, including by sharing opportunities, creating a bright future together, and expanding the benefits of modernisation to ensure more people enjoy the outcomes of modernisation more fairly. It stands firmly opposed to the practice of preserving one's own development privilege by suppressing and containing other countries' endeavours to achieve modernisation. In this sense, it is Chinese civilization that shapes the way Chinese modernisation unfolds, enabling it to shatter the myths in Western modernisation theories and to transcend the problem of insatiable material desires deeply rooted in the Western modernisation model that is dominated by the capitalist logic.

The sustained vitality of Chinese civilization comes from the modern dynamism infused into it by Chinese modernisation.

Indeed, Chinese modernisation has inevitably stemmed from the rejuvenation, not the disruption, of Chinese civilization that has a history of over five millennia. It draws from the essence of China's traditional culture, and – in turn – it invigorates and injects contemporary significance into the most dynamic elements of this cultural heritage by applying the truth of Marxism, and spurs the culture's creative transformation and innovative development, thus infusing Chinese modernisation with modern vitality. Chinese modernisation seeks to build upon, rather than erase, China's ancient civilization; it has developed within China, not imported from any other country.

This is particularly evident in the distinct creativity and inclusiveness of Chinese civilization. Creativity is the most vital attribute sustaining the enduring vigour of Chinese civilization. It is an ever-flowing spring that has carried Chinese civilization through countless historical challenges and, despite setbacks, enabled the civilization to forge ahead unceasingly from the ancient to the modern. Inclusiveness, meanwhile, lies deep in the cultural psyche of the Chinese nation, as well as its approach to engaging with diversity. It endows Chinese civilization with a strong capacity to assimilate, adapt, and harmonise differences, facilitating its healthy integration and interaction with other civilizations.

On the one hand, Chinese civilization has always been continuous yet adaptive. Its perpetual innovative spirit of discarding the outdated in favour of the new has been embedded in both the theoretical and practical innovations of Chinese modernisation. In pioneering and developing the path of Chinese modernisation upon the profound foundations of Chinese civilization, creativity manifests itself in integrating the basic tenets of Marxism with China's specific realities and the best of its traditional culture, transcending mere documentary or theoretical existence, representing a living, interactive, and innovative systematic construction, ultimately *"creating a new, organically unified cultural entity"*. This new cultural entity is precisely the modern civilization of the Chinese nation – a crucial achievement that must be realised through Chinese modernisation in the future.

Furthermore, neither Marxism nor Chinese civilization has ever rejected any system of truth or dismissed any achievement of other civilizations. They welcome any genuine, truthful understanding and the crystallisation of civilization—regardless of where or when it originates – as nourishment for their own growth. The CPC and the Chinese nation have always pursued broader theoretical horizons, learning from excellent achievements of all civilizations in human society with an open and inclusive mind. They draw on the aggregate of knowledge produced by humanity to innovate and develop the Party's theories, creating a broad theoretical framework that widely embraces and combines the strengths of others.

In sum, historical and cultural traditions constitute the foundations for building China into a great modern socialist country and rejuvenating the Chinese nation. In this sweeping, all-encompassing process, the advancement of Chinese modernisation and the self-renewal of Chinese civilization are two inseparable dimensions, mutually reinforcing each other. From the perspective of modernisation, the development of Chinese civilization is the harvest of modernisation, bearing the latter's fruits. Therefore, Chinese civilization and Chinese modernisation share the same goal and move forward in a synchronised manner.