

Viewing the Development of Human Society from Asia

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Introduction

One of the most important and enduring questions in the field of International Relations (IR) has been the improvement of human life. Textbooks of IR frequently tell their readers that the discipline was a by-product of an intellectual endeavour in the post-World War I world to bring about some form of order and stability in inter-state relations and prevent the outbreak of another war. While the outbreak of World War II and the confrontation between the American and Soviet camps is said to have brought about the rise of realism and the relative decline of this normative project, the end of the Cold War has brought about the ‘normative turn’ in IR and a renewed interest in the project of furthering human progress in the international realm. There has been a growing belief ‘that globalization and increased interdependence have given a greater reality to the previously abstract notion of sharing a single world and have helped to foster a cosmopolitan moral consciousness’ (Hurrell 2007: 70; Clark 2009). The collapse of the communist bloc has thus resulted in a belief that liberal democracy is the ‘only game in town’ (Fukuyama 1989; Fidler 2001), and the only viable political system that can realise happiness for humankind. Furthermore, the disappearance of the communist alternative has given new impetus to the drive to spread liberal democratic governance across the world, under the name of progress.

Accordingly, recent studies of IR have spent much effort in understanding how this political project has, and could be, realised. For instance, by examining the mechanisms of the diffusion of progressive, liberal-democratic norms, constructivist scholars have examined how moral progress can be brought about on an international scale (Klotz 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999). Scholars who identify with the so-called ‘English School’ (particularly its ‘solidarist’ wing) have also analysed the processes by which the international community has sought to play a greater role in furthering the protection of humans, who are seen as the ultimate constituents of international society (Wheeler, 2000).

This diffusion of purportedly ‘global’ norms has frequently been analysed through the seemingly neutral concept of ‘socialisation’. However, it is also possible to characterise it as a ‘civilising process’ (cf Bain 2003; Reus-Smit 2005), which can be defined as ‘a process involving the transfer of superior political, material, or social culture from the civilized to the uncivilized’ (Hirono 2008: 28). There are a number of reasons for this. First, in many of these studies the ‘socialiser’ is almost invariably a *Western* actor steeped in Western culture and values. As Kayaoglu (2010: 209, emphasis added) argues, ‘international norms like sovereignty, secularism, and human rights emerge from *the norm-generating European core*, and then diffuse into the norm-receiving non-European periphery. Western states or actors by default become dominant by dint of their possession of ‘superior’ knowledge of how to being about ‘progress’. In this sense, then, socialisation essentially becomes the ‘transfer’ of norms from a culture deemed ‘superior’.

Second, this process has taken place through a variety of social pressures, including praise and – crucially – ‘shaming’ (Johnston 2001). In the case of the latter, the objects of socialisation are frequently deemed ‘uncivilised’. As Mark B. Salter (2002: 157) notes, in the context of the end of the Cold War ‘[w]hether figured as “core/periphery”, “liberal zones of peace/realist zones of conflict” or “West/the rest”, the description of contemporary world politics in these terms has the effect of the “civilized/barbarian” division.’ The ‘socialised’, who are ultimately the recipients of ‘liberal’, ‘global’ norms, are typically non-Western autocratic regimes or actors, and as such they have frequently been unable to escape being depicted as the ‘uncivilised’ side who must accept the superior norms to escape this stigma.

While it may be possible to argue that such actions are permissible if they bring about moral progress, ‘civilising missions’ remain problematic for a number of reasons. First is the fact that ‘civilising missions’ almost axiomatically rely on a hierarchy of civilisations. As Andrew Linklater (2004: 8; cf Doty 1996) points out, ‘post-structuralist and post-colonial perspectives ... are understandably suspicious when descriptions of modern societies make reference to civilization because this language has so often promoted binary oppositions between “advanced” and “backward” stages of human development’. Who should decide which civilisations are more ‘superior’, and how? Most works that examine the ‘global diffusion’ of norms remain silent on these questions, but implicitly draw on Western liberal thought. In effect, the degree to which a polity is deemed ‘advanced’ or ‘civilised’ is measured by a decidedly Western yardstick – just like it was in the late-nineteenth century, a highpoint of European/Western-led ‘civilising missions’. Here, there is arguably a lingering sense of Eurocentrism which implicitly assumes that the ‘higher form of culture’, or ‘progress’ flows from the West alone (Hobson, 2004; Kayaoglu 2010). But how can we be so sure that this is the case? Here, it is worth reminding ourselves that less than seventy years ago Western confidence (or complacency) in the superiority of its ‘civilisation’ was shattered when it discovered the genocide committed by Nazi Germany. While Western philosophical traditions may have bequeathed us many of the values that we cherish, this does not mean that it has the monopoly on civilisational ‘superiority’.

The second issue is that ‘civilising missions’ can lead to the emergence of ethnocentric exceptionalism that presumes a particular civilisation’s unique qualities, as well as its almost manifest destiny to be propagated to other peoples. This can lead to a lack of empathy towards those deemed ‘uncivilised’, particularly if they reject the ‘civilisation’ that they are being ‘taught’. One hardly need be reminded of the various ‘civilising missions’ undertaken by European powers during the nineteenth century, when many non-Europeans – often deemed as ‘savage’ – who chose not to accept the trappings of European civilisation were treated brutally. Of course the blatant racism and ethnocentrism of this period is rightly anathema in the context of the twenty-first century where the notion of racial equality has made considerable inroads. Yet, modern day ‘civilisation missions’ are still steeped in notions of exceptionalism, which frequently blind people to this darker aspect. Stephen M. Walt (2011) provides us with an astute reminder of this when he writes with regard to present-day American exceptionalism and the United States’ (U.S.) attempts to spread liberal democracy:

U.S. military action has led directly or indirectly to the deaths of 250,000 Muslims over the past three decades ..., including the more than 100,000 people who died following the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. U.S. drones and Special Forces are going after suspected terrorists in at least five countries at present and have killed an unknown number of innocent civilians in the process.... while Americans would undoubtedly regard such acts as indefensible if some foreign country were doing them to us, hardly any U.S. politicians have questioned these policies. Instead, Americans still wonder, ‘Why do they hate us?’

Given these problems, is it possible to reconceptualise the ‘civilising process’ as a culturally neutral process? Will we ever be able to reconfigure it as a sociological approach that seeks to analyse and the process by which humankind (and states) achieves ‘mutual identification with each other’ and ‘empathize and ... feel for and sympathize with other people in their relationships with them’ (Linklater 2004:11)? This essay is an attempt to explore these questions, and does this through the case studies of Japanese and Chinese ‘civilising missions’. It proceeds as follows. First, it will examine the case of Japanese ‘civilising missions’ which took place in Taiwan during the Meiji period (1868-1912). In the section that follows, I then turn to the more contemporary example of China in Africa, and seek to examine whether or not it is possible to observe the emergence of discourses which may point to Chinese ‘civilising missions’ in Africa. It is important to acknowledge that this development is taking place in a completely different context from the Japanese case. As we will see below, Japan’s ‘civilising missions’ took place at a time when ‘civilised’ states were believed to have the *noblesse oblige* to guide the ‘uncivilised’ to progress under their tutelage. In the post-colonial context of today, it is obviously extremely difficult to undertake ‘civilising missions’ backed by military power. However, ‘civilising missions’ can arguably take place when a state’s attempts to propagate some form of socio-economic change – no matter how ‘peaceful’ it may be – is supported by a notion of superiority and exceptionalism. These notions imply that the inferior are expected to learn from the superior polity’s example, and that the latter are endowed with qualities that uniquely qualify them to act as a ‘teacher’ of ‘superior’ values that bring about ‘desirable’ change.

The Japanese and Chinese cases are interesting for a number of reasons. First, neither shared the same civilisation or god as Europeans or Americans. European ‘civilising missions’ have, to varying degrees, often been undergirded by a desire to spread Christianity (particularly in the nineteenth century), and this has at times given their missions a strong universalistic character. Indeed, religiosity is still cited as one of the key factors that inform American exceptionalism and its belief in its unique destiny to ‘redeem’ others (Tuveson 1968). Both the Chinese and Japanese civilisations, however, were not Christian. Hence, it is possible that the two may have escaped the universalist, proselytising zeal often seen in European ‘civilising missions’. Second, both states have been victims of coercive European attempts to propagate the ‘standard of civilisation’ (Gong 1984). Their bitter experiences, coupled with a sense of ambivalence towards Western civilising missions, may have resulted in ‘civilising missions’ with greater sensitivity to cultural difference, thus providing us with hints for overcoming the aforementioned problems that have frequently dogged ‘civilising missions’ throughout the globe.

Japan’s civilising mission in Taiwan

Japan’s civilising missions took place primarily after the Meiji Restoration of 1867, which saw the feudal Tokugawa shogunate overthrown. Japan certainly possessed its own notions of exceptionalism based primarily on notions of imperial divinity (Tanaka 1975: 172; Tsukamoto 1979: 3), but under the Tokugawa the Japanese made limited attempts to carry out a ‘civilisation mission’ to propagate its own civilisation to other lands (cf. Oguma 1998: 19, 51-53). [\[1\]\[#N1\]](#)

A turning point came after Japan’s encounter with the European international order in 1853, and the Meiji Restoration which followed. Supported by a belief in the inherent superiority of European ‘civilisation’ that emerged in the context of ‘scientific’ racism, the industrial revolution and the rapid technological advances that accompanied this process in the late-nineteenth century (Adas 1989), the European powers imposed the ‘standard of civilisation’ on what they considered to be ‘semi-civilised’ or ‘savage’ polities. This meant in practice that the latter needed to adopt international law, European-styled political institutions, legal codes and diplomatic practices, in addition to ensuring the protection of foreign lives and property (Gong 1984).

Failure for a state to fulfil the 'standard of civilisation' meant that its sovereignty would not be respected, and neither would it qualify for protection by international law. Instead, it was considered acceptable (and morally justifiable) that the 'civilised' powers override the 'uncivilised' polities' sovereignty in order to guide them towards 'civilisation' (Keene 2002; Suzuki 2009).

In this sense, the European international order was a dualistic one. Its normative structures had historically developed in the context of attempting to forge some form of coexistence among frequently warring-European states that were 'civilised'. [2],[#N2]. This meant that on the one hand, the European international order possessed a side which aimed for 'toleration' and 'coexistence'. On the other hand, towards 'uncivilised' states, the European international order showed a very different, coercive face: peoples who lived in 'semi-civilised' or 'savage' polities were frequently regarded as 'child-like' or 'indolent', thus incapable of governing their territories (Hobson 2004: 219-242), and needing to be guided towards 'civilisation' under European/White tutelage. Therefore, the European international order gave normative licence for 'uncivilised' polities to be invaded and homogenised by the 'civilised', all in the name of 'progress'.

The Meiji leadership were aware of this dualism (Suzuki 2009: 56-88), and sought to avoid European colonisation by transforming their state into a 'civilised' one as defined by the Europeans. Their attempts to reconfigure their domestic institutions are well known (Gong 1984; Suganami 1984; Westney 1987). However, what is less known is that the Japanese elites' exposure to the dualisms in the European international order had resulted in the internalisation of the view that 'civilised' great powers also had the moral obligation to spread the blessings of 'civilisation' to 'uncivilised' lands and its peoples, and that this was an inherent component of a 'civilised' state's identity. As Robert Eskildsen (2002: 389) argues, '[m]imesis of Western imperialism...went hand in hand with mimesis of Western civilization'. Thus, Meiji Japanese imperial expansion was motivated – if not exclusively – by a desire to shore up Japan's claims to 'civilised' identity by undertaking their own 'civilising missions'.

Civilising the 'savages' to attain 'civilised' status: the colonisation of Taiwan

It is important to note, however, that Japan was still considered a 'semi-civilised' state in the late-nineteenth century, when its first imperialist expansions took place (as we will see below). Therefore, Japan's 'civilising missions' were carried out neither in the context of a conviction in the supremacy and universalism of Japanese culture, nor in the complacent belief that Japan had somehow reached parity with the 'civilised' European powers. Instead, Japan's 'civilising missions' were supported by a 'Japanese-style Orientalism', which cast the rest of Asia – excluding Japan, of course – as 'backward' or 'uncivilised' in order to construct and reinforce Japan's 'civilised' identity.

Yet, as Oguma (1998: 8-9) points out, the binaries of 'Occident-Orient' or 'civilised-uncivilised' cannot adequately capture the ambiguities in Japanese Orientalism. The first issue is the existence of pan-Asianism, which sought unity among the Asian peoples to resist Western encroachment, rather than construct an Asian 'Other'. The second, perhaps more relevant issue, is Japan's own geographical position in Asia and its ethnic/racial makeup, which meant that the juxtaposition of Occident-Orient did not apply very well. Consequently, Japan's claims to 'civilised' status were constantly in doubt, particularly in the racist climate of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. While Japan may have successfully convinced the 'civilised family of nations' that it was more civilised than the 'rest of Asia', it was not assured that it had reached equality with the European powers. The Japanese would find this out for themselves in 1919, when the European powers vetoed the inclusion of a clause on Racial Equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations.

Japan actually occupied an uncomfortably ambiguous position, with ‘uncivilised’ Asia below it, and ‘civilised’ Europe above.

Japan’s own ‘civilising missions’ were therefore not always motivated by a powerful desire to spread the trappings of ‘the most developed civilisation’, as was frequently the case in the West. It would, however, be erroneous to assume that the Japanese ‘civilising missions’ lacked the zeal found in their Western counterparts. Instead of civilisational universalism, Japan’s missions were driven by a desire to overcome the ambiguous, ‘semi-civilised’ status that Japan languished in. In this sense, then, Japan’s ‘civilising missions’ were just as ideologically motivated as the West’s. The case which demonstrates this most eloquently is the 1874 Japanese invasion of Taiwan. While the original pretext for invading the island was to punish ‘aboriginals’ who had killed ‘Japanese’ fishermen, [3],[#N3]the mission quickly became connected with the demonstration of Japanese claims to ‘civilised status’. The Meiji leadership drew on the advice of Western advisors, and claimed that the expedition was also aimed at leading ‘the [Taiwanese] natives gradually to civilization...eventually establishing a profitable enterprise between them and the Japanese government’ (cited in Eskildsen 2002: 397). Hierarchies among humans quickly emerged as well, with the Taiwanese aboriginals being depicted as inherently ‘savage’ by *Western standards*. There was very little room for cultural/civilisational solidarity or sensitivity based on an affinity as fellow ‘Asians’. As Eskildsen (2002: 400, emphasis added) notes:

Commercial sources about the expedition also used exaggerated reports of cannibalism to stress the savage nature of the aborigines. The aborigines practiced headhunting, to be sure, but not cannibalism, and the earliest reports of cannibalism appear to have been inspired by *Western expectations* that the aborigines engaged in that quintessentially uncivilized act.

Elsewhere, woodblock prints published by the commercial press sought to accentuate Japan’s *difference* from the Taiwanese natives. Whereas the latter were depicted wearing ragged clothing, the former sported Western-styled haircuts or clothing (Eskildsen 2002). ‘In the context of the 1870s’, Eskildsen (2002: 402) argues,

... a larger cultural distance helped both to validate Japanese claims for higher status in the Western-dominated international order and to eliminate a middle ground between civilization and savagery that might trap the Japanese in a less than salutary solidarity with other East Asian peoples.

Japan’s position in the civilisational hierarchy meant that ‘civilising missions’ aimed at reinforcing Japan’s claims to ‘civilised’ status would continue in Taiwan, following its colonisation by the Japanese in 1895. As was the case in the 1874 expedition, *Western standards* remained the benchmark of what could be considered ‘civilised’, and Japan’s colonial governance of the island reflected this. Takekoshi Yosaburō’s preface in *Japanese Rule in Formosa* (1996: vii) – written in English and clearly intended for a Western audience, who had the power to define who was civilised or not – demonstrates this vividly. Takekoshi wrote:

Western nations have long believed that on their shoulders alone rested the responsibility of colonizing the yet unopened portions of the globe, and extending to the inhabitants the benefits of civilisation; but now we Japanese, rising from the ocean in the extreme Orient, wish as a nation to take part in this great and glorious work.

In similar fashion to woodblock prints in the 1870s, the Japanese took photographs of themselves next to the Taiwanese aboriginals. Again, such photos would show Japanese men dressed in Western clothing, while the aboriginals remained in their traditional attire, leaving others with little doubt about the widening gap between Japan and the rest of Asia. Takekoshi's book, *Japanese Rule in Formosa*, also reminded readers of Japan's inherent superiority over the peoples of Taiwan by including photos of aborigines under the title of 'savage types'.

The historical experiences of Japan point to the inherent difficulties of overcoming the two aforementioned difficulties of 'civilising missions', the construction of civilisational hierarchies and the emergence of ethnocentric exceptionalism. In the late-nineteenth century, only those with 'superior' civilisation were qualified to 'guide' the 'savages' towards progress. This fact did not escape the attention of the Japanese, and it was thus almost inevitable that they would also label their fellow Asians as 'inferior', despite belonging to the same geographical region, racial group, and sharing many cultural traits. While they did not initially possess their own concept of a universalistic civilisation that needed to be propagated throughout the globe, their desire to attain 'civilised' status in the European international order meant that *Western* notions of 'civilisational superiority' were adopted by the Japanese. Furthermore, the need to culturally distance Japan from Asia quickly led to the dehumanisation of Asian peoples as nothing more than 'savages'. [4].[#N4]

Ironically, even the pan-Asianists, who frequently exaggerated the 'common bonds' among Asian peoples and states, were not always immune from this 'civilising mission' dynamic, despite their calls for Asian unity. As Oguma (1998: 8) points out, it is debatable whether acts such as forcing Asian peoples to conform to Shinto rituals (something which took place during Japanese occupation of the Asia-Pacific region during World War II) can be called a 'civilising mission'. Yet, notions of exceptionalism and racial hierarchy were arguably just as visible. Despite their disdain for Western racism, many pan-Asianists neither questioned their own racism towards their fellow Asians, nor their belief that the region required Japanese leadership. Instead, the latter were frequently seen as incapable of governing themselves, and were in need of Japanese guidance to overthrow the Western imperialist yoke and realise an 'Asia for Asians'. It is thus no surprise that many pan-Asianists often proved to be highly violent colonisers who displayed just as much violence as their counterparts that attempted to 'civilise' Asia along Western notions of 'civilisation'.

The Exceptional Great Power: China in Africa

The Japanese case examined above gives us an interesting example which demonstrates that even cultural or racial affinity cannot prevent the emergence of notions of superiority and cultural neutrality. Yet this in itself may not be enough to write off 'civilising missions' in the contemporary context. Japanese 'civilising missions' did, after all, reflect the racist climate of its time, and it is perhaps not surprising that Japanese 'civilising missions' shared many features with their European counterparts.

It would be extremely difficult for these characteristics to be replicated in 'civilising missions' today. Non-European peoples' struggles against racism and colonialism, coupled with the notion of national self-determination, have led to the independence of most colonies. Racial equality has also led to the discrediting of the type of cultural universalism that cast non-European civilisations as 'backward' or 'savage', making the construction of a 'hierarchy of civilisations' that are part and parcel of 'civilising missions' increasingly problematic. The racism displayed by many Europeans in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century has become a source of great embarrassment, meaning that overt expressions of national/racial exceptionalism are less acceptable than they were.

Given these changes, we would expect the People's Republic of China (PRC) to be the least likely candidate to engage in 'civilising missions'. China historically had a long history of possessing a universalistic notion of 'all under heaven (*tianxia*)', where non-Chinese 'barbarians' would – at least in theory – be voluntarily assimilated into the irresistible qualities of Chinese civilisation and the benevolent rule of the emperor. Yet, China's more recent encounters with the expanding European international order in the late-nineteenth century may have tempered such universalistic notions. The Chinese were themselves victims of European 'civilising missions' (Gong 1984; Zhang 1991; Suzuki 2009), and the memory of its 'national humiliation' is a strong component of its national identity today. It frequently claims that its diplomacy is the antithesis of the imperialist powers', and this stance is enshrined in its 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' which include non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and mutual respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Beijing is keen to point out that it 'consistently opposes imperialism, hegemonism and colonialism, works to strengthen unity with the people of other countries, supports the oppressed nations and the developing countries in their just struggle to win and preserve national independence and develop their national economies' (Gov.cn 2006).

The exemplary developing state

Yet, in spite of these lofty aspirations, China has seemingly been unable to escape engaging in notions of exceptionalism, rather than adhering to the notions of equality it frequently preaches. Most prominent here is the notion that China *can* and *should* play a uniquely moral role in international politics. It is not easy to pinpoint the origins of this sentiment. While it is important to acknowledge that 'history and culture, while exerting profound and subtle influences, do not by themselves determine the peculiarities of China's exceptionalism' (Zhang 2011: 10), one potential explanation is that China's long-held belief that it was the apex of civilisation still wields influence over the minds of the Chinese. Another is the history of China as a great power, which results in a self-belief that China has, China must, and China *deserves* to play an important role in international politics commensurate with this status (Suzuki 2008).

Whatever the origins of this line of thinking may be, one thing that quickly becomes clear is that this sense of Chinese exceptionalism leads to the emergence of a hierarchy of politics. The sense that China is somehow *uniquely* moral means that others are axiomatically either evil ('imperialist' states such as Japan, the U.S., and the Soviet Union are typically depicted as such) or, if not evil, then less morally advanced than China is. In a typical example, Sheng Ding (2008: 199 emphasis added) asserts China's superiority and Western moral inferiority with reference to China's aid-giving in Africa:

With the U.S. *absent-mindedness and negligence*, and the European countries' *indifference* of the region, Beijing has launched its well-designed diplomatic offensives toward Africa....Built on Beijing's long-time 'political brotherhood' with Africa, China's new diplomatic efforts in Africa have been characterized with economic cooperation on the basis of the respect for state sovereignty and 'win-win' strategy, rather than political rhetoric.

This theme is repeated by a number of other Chinese authors. Luo Jianbo and Zhang Xiaomin (2011: 1802, emphasis added), for instance, assert that China '*selflessly* offered African countries a great amount of aid to the best of its ability', despite itself being an underdeveloped state. Fan Zhenshui's (2011: 13-14) depiction of the PRC's early days on the African continent is another interesting example of this line of thinking. Fan describes a reception hosted by Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, where the various guests voice their

desires to overthrow Western imperialism. Amidst these voices, Fan claims, the Chinese ambassador said very little. Yet, he commanded a great deal of attention

...because he came from a Third World state that had just completed a successful revolution, and *had only just beaten American imperialism....* Common goals brought China and Africa together; the *African peoples saw China as their model*, and the Chinese people saw the African peoples as their own brothers (Fan 2011: 14, emphasis added).

Fan's passage here mirrors 'Mao's revolutionary ambition...to turn China into a land of universal justice and equality, while at the same time reviving China's central position in the world and making it a model for other "oppressed nations"' (Zhang 2011: 6). China's sense of exceptionalism can be seen from the fact that the PRC is seen as 'unique' and 'ahead' of the African states, because no African state has, to date, faced the U.S. in a war and 'won' (even though it is arguable that the Korean War ended in a stalemate, rather than in outright Chinese victory). The African states, then, are in fact implicitly depicted as lagging behind China in their achievements with regard to Third World liberation and solidarity.

In recent years, such hierarchies are reflected increasingly in terms of development. Zhao Zunsheng's novel about a Chinese worker in Africa includes a scene where the road just laid down by the Chinese aid workers is destroyed by the crown prince of the country (Zhao 2010: 22-25). Soldiers beat up villagers and arrest them at will, giving the impression of a chaotic and (somewhat ironically, given China's own authoritarian system of governance) despotic society. Africa is also depicted as a rather quaint, exotic society: when a Chinese aid worker buys some snacks for a local boy, he is shocked to see him choose fried insects (Zhao 2010: 9). Such views are actually not that different from popular views of Africa held by the West, which is frequently accused of paternalism vis-à-vis African peoples. It thus comes as no surprise that some Chinese Africanists are highly critical of Chinese views of Africa, stating that '[m]ost of our main understandings of Africa come from the West' (Li 2011: 32).

These hierarchies also extend to humans. With reference to Chinese depictions of Chinese migrants overseas, Pál Nyíri (2006: 96) has noted that 'Chinese narratives make them into the humane pioneers that, in the Western versions, only Westerners themselves can be'. Thus, China's unique contribution to the development of Africa is frequently stated. Fan (2011: 11) gives an example of a Chinese specialist teaching African natives how to cultivate tea and set up a tea plantation, which results in African natives praising Chinese aid as a 'true expression of internationalism' and a 'model of South-South cooperation'. Similarly, the protagonist of Zhao's (2010: 29) novel is praised by his African counterpart when the latter notes that certain great powers only give aid for selfish reasons.

In contrast, the Africans are depicted as somewhat 'different' from the Chinese – and this differentiation has decidedly 'civilisational' undertones. This is in line with the 'public perception of blacks in China' which 'is still strongly tinged with a Spencerian idea of racial inferiority; African countries are often described as *both backward and uncivilized*' (Nyíri 2006: 103; Cheng 2011), despite the official rhetoric of 'brotherhood'. One characteristic of Africans that is often noted is their indolence, which is actually not that different from nineteenth-century European views of African peoples. A Chinese media report notes this, albeit implicitly:

In African eyes, the Chinese seemed to work amazingly hard. In Africa, two-day holidays were implemented much earlier than China. Even if overtime pay was much higher than usual pay, Africans do not like working overtime; they want to benefit from their rights to rest, which is given ample legal protection. (*Wangyixinwen*, 2011)

In a passage that highlights the ‘civilisational difference’ between the two, Zhao’s (2010: 14-16) novel depicts a scene where the local monarch decides to ‘reward’ the Chinese for their hard work by giving them local women, stating that he has long been worried that the Chinese workers have no female company. The Chinese politely refuse, saying that they already have wives. The PRC ambassador explains that ‘if we got ourselves additional wives, that will be polygamy, and we would become *an international laughing stock*’ (Zhao 2010: 16). The king responds: ‘You’re only allowed one wife? How absurd! I have nine wives, and I don’t mind at all’. Here, we may recall that the ‘standard of civilization’ as dictated by the West in the late-nineteenth century listed polygamy as an inherently ‘uncivilised’ practice. By showing the Chinese scrupulously adhering to these ‘international’ standards, Zhao’s novel portrays the Africans as promiscuous and less ‘civilised’ than their Chinese ‘brothers’. Such themes are repeated in a recent reportage on the Chinese in Africa. Noting Chinese workers’ tendency not to bring their wives with them, the reportage states: ‘Locals frequently ask as follows: “You have been here for many years now, and you don’t bring your wives or have girlfriends; how do you put up with it? Did you take medicine before you came to suppress your sexual desires?”’ (*Wangyixinwen* 2011).

A Chinese ‘Mission Civilisatrice’ in the making?

Will, then, a ‘civilising mission’ with Chinese characteristics inevitably emerge? This is not an easy question to answer, as we have yet to see a clear example of this process coming from China. Furthermore, as Zhang (2011: 15) notes, there are multiple forms of Chinese exceptionalism, and one strand ‘claims to reject the imposition of a particular ideology or value system to the exclusion of others, and such respect for diversity is said to derive from China’s traditional cultural principle’. Furthermore, it is asserted that China’s preference is for ‘leading by example’, which is rooted in ‘Confucius’s idea of exemplification, in contrast to the Western one of “domination by spiritual or military conquest”’. It could also be argued that in an international system characterised by American hegemony, the Chinese have been given little political space to embark on their own ‘civilising mission’. Any perceived attempts by China to challenge the Western-centric status quo have led to suspicions that China is a ‘revisionist power’, and been detrimental to China’s international image. To date, the Chinese elite seem highly sensitive to these ‘China threat’ discourses, and have maintained a low profile, eschewing any attempts to challenge the United States’ (and broadly, Western) dominance as they are seen to undermine Western attempts to spread liberal democratic governance.

Yet, such notions in themselves do not guarantee that China’s stance with regard to ‘civilising missions’ will remain passive. There are, of course, differences from Japanese ‘civilising missions’ which took place in the nineteenth century, as well as the Western missions on which Japan’s ‘civilising missions’ were modelled. Most important is that China’s own ‘civilising missions’ are *not* based on the propagation of a non-indigenous ‘civilisation’ that is conceptualised as more ‘superior’ than the ‘civilisation’ espoused by Chinese state. This is in contrast to the Japanese case, where the West and its ‘civilisation’ were deemed superior and propagated by the Japanese. Of course, the content of China’s supposedly ‘superior’ values for socio-economic change may in practice differ very little from Western ones in reality. Much of China’s ‘modernisation’ efforts towards Chinese ethnic minorities are, for instance, based on modernisation theories that were once popular in the West. However, this ‘civilisation’ tends to be conceptualised as the civilisation of the Han ethnic majority (Nyíri 2006: 91-92; Barabantseva 2009), rather than originating from a ‘superior’, ‘Western’ civilisation. Instead, (Han) China’s own example is deemed to be a worthy model of emulation.

Seen in this light, the PRC’s claim that it only ‘leads by example’ becomes part and parcel of its ‘civilising’ discourse, as it ‘indicate[s] subtly the *moral* superiority of China’s economic “contributions”...over the more socially interventionist aid schemes of the West’ (Nyíri 2006: 104, emphasis in original). Furthermore, in spite of the official rhetoric, the PRC *does* have a history of embarking on ‘civilising missions’, particularly

towards its ethnic minorities (such as the Tibetans), who (as indicated above) are expected to assimilate into the 'modern' Han majority civilisation. Of course it is arguable that the PRC only undertakes 'civilising missions' within areas it considers (rightly or wrongly) its own territorial borders, and not overseas. However, such claims may be placed in doubt when we consider the following passage which depicts the Han Chinese interaction with the Oroqen ethnic minority: 'Under the help of their Han brothers, the Oroqen gradually learnt to cultivate land and grow vegetables. Before liberation, the Oroqen had no culture, and worshipped gods if they were ill. Now, they have their own schools and hospitals' (Chen *et al*, 1987: 176). We may recall here that African peoples are also treated as 'brothers', but this passage indicates that when the PRC claims brotherly relations, it does not necessarily symbolise equality: in fact, the PRC is assumed to be the 'bigger brother' who may, if need be, guide his younger 'brothers' to a better life.

China's appetite for 'civilising missions' may be whetted even more by its astonishing economic growth in recent years. The PRC's success has brought about debates about the emergence of a new, non-democratic model of growth sometimes known as the 'Beijing consensus'. Although this concept was (ironically) coined by a scholar based in the West (Ramo 2004; cf Kurlantzick 2007), it is worth noting that some members of the political elite are eagerly embracing this concept. Luo Jianbo and Zhang Xiaomin (2011: 1806) leave the readers with very little doubt about their belief that the PRC has been the harbinger for 'progress' in the underdeveloped world, and that other states *should* learn from China:

China's rapid development brought light of hope for the developing countries which experienced great difficulty in their development after political independence...China's success provides a new option and possibility for Africa's development, the African countries 'look eastward'...China's development experience demonstrates its tremendous attraction and influence, enhances China's soft power and earns China the international say.

There is to date no agreement within the PRC as to what exactly this 'consensus' is (Suzuki 2009), and this has meant that there have been no concerted, systematic efforts to propagate the so-called 'Beijing consensus'. Yet, the confident statement of Luo and Zhang do provide us with some indication that China's growing political and economic clout are beginning to translate into a confidence that China *can* guide certain polities and peoples to 'true' happiness that the West never could.

Conclusion

The Japanese and Chinese cases highlight the inherent difficulty involved in escaping the highly subjective nature of 'civilising missions', and perhaps suggest that a culturally neutral attempt to propagate 'progressive' values is perhaps an impossible task. As we have seen, a civilising mission involves the construction of a hierarchy of 'civilisations' or a 'higher culture', and this often leads to paternalism, where it is assumed that there exists a particular polity or race that is in a position to place the 'less civilised' under its guidance. Civilising missions in Asia show that the construction of a 'civilised' identity always required the construction of an 'uncivilised' other, and vice versa. In order for a 'civilising process' to take place, *difference* has to be emphasised first. Under such conditions, there is probably very little room for the emergence of mutual identification between the 'civilised' and 'uncivilised'. Mutual empathy is equally improbable (if not impossible) when mutual identification is lacking: as we have seen, the Japanese displayed a high level of racism towards their fellow Asians. The public intellectual Taguchi Ukichi even claimed that the Japanese were actually Caucasians because the Japanese could trace their ethnic ancestry to Aryans. It was claimed that the 'inferior' Chinese, Koreans and Russians were part of the Mongoloid race (Sakai 2009: 22-42). In the case

of China, this lack of empathy with those deemed 'less civilised' or 'inferior' has manifested itself in ugly cyber racism towards Africans (Cheng 2011).

Based on these observations, perhaps the only way to realise a genuinely inclusive 'civilising mission' characterised by empathy is by constructing a 'shared civilisation' that has been established through genuine dialogue between different civilisations on the basis of equality, rather than 'hierarchy' and 'difference'. But is this possible? To this day, the discipline of IR has studied international ethics from a predominantly Eurocentric point of view (Acharya and Buzan 2007). While the existence of many non-Western scholars (itself a problematic term) researching Western ethics may have led to greater 'cosmopolitanism', the flipside of this could be that Western scholarship and knowledge has established some form of hegemony over what we understand as 'ethical' or 'civilised' conduct. In other words, non-Western voices may not be able to make any meaningful contributions to how humankind ought to live. This hegemony remains deep-rooted, even in the case of Chinese 'civilising mission' discourses that are often highly nationalistic and claimed to be 'different' from those of the West. Despite all the rhetorical bravado of being 'different' from the West, the Chinese implicitly draw heavily on Western traditions of social science. Even more ironically, the Chinese continue to ignore the wishes of peoples who do not wish to subscribe to these notions of the 'good life' (as the cases of Tibet or Xinjiang show), helping to entrench Eurocentric notions of 'development' and 'progress' even further. Although we may be witnessing the rise of China which, on the surface, espouses 'non-Western' views of international order, this by no means guarantees the emergence of a 'dialogue' between civilisations – in fact, there is a possibility that it would serve as a catalyst to further entrench the normative status quo.

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Notes

1. Some notable exceptions may be the Ryūkyū kingdom and the Ainu people, who each came under the control of the Satsuma and Matsumae fiefdoms respectively. However, neither fiefdom made concerted attempts to assimilate Ryūkyūans and Ainus to Japanese customs and culture, and even if they did, such undertakings were usually half-hearted. ♣.[#N1-ptr1]
2. This is not to claim that relations among the European states were somehow uniquely peaceful. It is, however, important to acknowledge that despite the frequent wars and rivalries amongst European states, there did exist certain norms that could potentially protect a weaker state from having its sovereignty extinguished by more powerful states. Thus, European states could appeal to international law to protect their independence, while the institution of the balance of power could also function to prevent great powers from increasing their power by invading their weaker neighbours. ♣.[#N2-ptr1]
3. In fact, the fishermen were from Ryūkyū, which was only fully incorporated into the Japanese state in 1879, five years later. Hence, the invasion of Taiwan was intimately connected to shoring up Japanese claims to Ryūkyū, by claiming that its inhabitants were Japanese citizens. ♣.[#N3-ptr1]
4. Recently, the Japanese public broadcaster, NHK, reported that the Japanese brought with them a 'human zoo' consisting of the Paiwan aborigines of Taiwan for exhibition in the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition held in London, sparking off a string of accusations of biased reporting or fabrication of historical facts. Some of the protests centre on the debate about whether or not the exhibition of the Taiwanese natives could be defined as a 'human zoo'. This is not the place to resolve this debate – however, it does serve to remind us of the degree to which Japan was engaged in colonial practices very similar to its European counterparts, who frequently did dehumanise their colonial subjects. ♣.[#N4-ptr1]

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