

China's Global Civilisation Initiative

The Editors of Monthly Review

Last spring, China introduced its Global Civilisation Initiative, meant to accompany its earlier Global Development Initiative and its Global Security Initiative (on the latter two initiatives, see “Notes from the Editors,” [The U.S. is waging a New Cold War, not simply on Russia but also on China](#), October 2023). The Global Civilisation Initiative was presented by Xi Jinping at the Communist Party of China in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting in Beijing on March 15, 2023. In his speech, Xi articulated four cardinal principles underlying the Global Civilisation Initiative:



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- (1) We advocate the respect for the diversity of civilisations. Countries need to uphold the principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue and inclusiveness among civilisations, and let cultural exchanges transcend estrangement, mutual learning transcend clashes, and coexistence transcend feelings of superiority.
- (2) We advocate the common values of humanity. Peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom are the common aspirations of all peoples. Countries need to keep an open mind in appreciating the perceptions of values by different civilisations, and refrain from imposing their own values or models on others and from stoking ideological confrontation.
- (3) We advocate the importance of inheritance and innovation of civilisations. Countries need to fully harness the relevance of their histories and cultures to the present times, and push for creative transformation and innovative development of their fine traditional cultures.
- (4) We advocate robust international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. Countries need to explore the building of a global network for inter-civilisation dialogue and cooperation, enrich the contents of exchanges and

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expand avenues of cooperation to promote mutual understanding and friendship among people of all countries and jointly advance the progress of human civilisations. ("Full Text of Xi Jinping's Keynote Address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting," March 16, 2023, english.scio.gov.cn).

It might be thought that such a declaration, emphasising the diversity of civilisations, principles of equality, mutual cultural exchange, and peaceful coexistence would have been met with universal acclaim by all countries. Instead, the response in the major foreign policy and media organs of the United States and Europe was one of outrage, followed by blistering attacks. The Wall Street Journal saw China's Global Civilisation initiative as nothing less than a direct assault on the West in its declaration that "unnamed countries 'refrain from imposing their own values or models on others.'" This whole notion, readers were told—as if the historical facts were in question—"builds on the [Chinese] Communist Party's longstanding interpretation of modern history as a period in which predatory Western nations, taking advantage of China's weakness in the late 19th century, exploited the country for selfish ends and held it back." For The Economist magazine, Xi's "triad of global initiatives," including the Global Civilisation Initiative, "will deepen the world's divides." The real import of this latest initiative, with its principle of "equality of civilisation," The Economist objects, is that "the West should learn to live with Chinese communism. It [communism] may be based on Marxism, a Western theory, but it is also the fruit of China's ancient culture" (Jonathan Cheng, "China Is Starting to Act Like a Global Power," Wall Street Journal, March 22, 2023; "China's Latest Attempt to Rally the World Against Western Values," The Economist, April 27, 2023).

If leading organs of capitalist economic ideology like the Wall Street Journal and The Economist strongly opposed China's call for civilisational coexistence, the main organs of U.S. grand imperial strategy were equally incensed. Foreign Policy adopted a stance similar to The Economist, insisting that Marxism is a Western, not Chinese, theory, and antagonistic to traditional Chinese culture such as Daoism. This apparently deprives the People's Republic of China (PRC) of the legitimate right to present itself as representing Chinese civilisation. The Diplomat chastised China for trying to undermine the U.S.-dominated "rules-based order" by promoting a "relativism of values." The PRC, we are duly informed, is not operating in the tradition of Confucius, but rather that of "Thomas Hobbes" of bellum omnium contra omnes. For China to even speak of "civilisation," The Diplomat explained, was wrong, since it carried with it the shadow of Western colonialism in Latin America and elsewhere in the early modern era, which had been promoted in the very name of civilisation. Worst of all, China's Global Civilisation Initiative is aimed at "deprivileging the voice of the United States," preventing it from carrying out military interventions aimed at regime change in "authoritarian" states that violate its international rules-based order. China, at the same time, is left free to continue to promote "its subversive influence in the internal affairs of countries throughout the world" (James Palmer, "Why Xi Is Rebranding Chinese Cultural History," Foreign Policy, April 19, 2023; R. Evan Ellis, "The Trouble with China's Global Civilisation Initiative," The Diplomat, June 1, 2023).

The Economist was particularly alarmed by China's characterisation of itself as a "civilisational state" as advanced by the influential Chinese political and cultural historian Zhang Weiwei. The civilisational state idea is seen as lying behind the Global Civilisation Initiative. In addition to being a leading voice emphasising the re-emergence of Chinese civilisation on the world stage, Zhang has directly challenged the hegemonic U.S.-based conception of formal, market-based democracy. For Zhang, China, while lacking in formal democracy in Western terms, has been relatively successful in

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promoting "substantive democracy." Some kind of formal democracy, though not necessarily following the current Western model, is necessary, he insists, but the key in the struggle for democracy is to create substantive democracy. "In many Western countries," he writes, "democracy has long since become a kind of 'game,' in which democracy means the election campaign, the election

campaign means political marketing, and political marketing means money, resources, public relations, strategy, image, and acting. Politicians in such a system do not have to keep their promises; all that matters is that they [the promises] help to win the election." Substantive democracy, in Zhang's terms, means "good governance," relying on both meritocratic selection and election, so as to generate a political system that draws on the full range of abilities of the wider population while focusing on satisfying their real developmental needs, in line with "'popular opinion' and the 'people's heart.'" (The issue of "substantive democracy," it should be noted, was long emphasised in István Mészáros's "critique of the state," as exemplified by his *Beyond Leviathan*.)

The Economist, though, will have none of this and accuses Zhang of contributing to "China's latest attempt to rally the world against Western values." Nevertheless, it is hard to understand how notions of substantive democracy, equality, freedom, civilisational diversity, peaceful coexistence, friendship between all peoples, and nonintervention in the affairs of other countries, constitute an inherent attack on "Western values" (as expressed, for example, in Immanuel Kant's "On Perpetual Peace")—unless those "values" are equated simply with monopoly capitalism and imperialism (Economist, "China's Latest Attempt"; Zhang Weiwei, "[On Telling China's Story](#)," Reading the China Dream [translation of article from Peking Daily, June 21, 2021], [readingthechinadream.com](#); Zhang Weiwei, *The China Horizon* [Hackensack, New Jersey: World Century, 2016], 103, 138, 145; István Mészáros, "[The Critique of the State](#)," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 4 [September 2015]: 23–27; István Mészáros, [Beyond Leviathan](#) [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022], 386–91).

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