

The Multiple Images of Modernity

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Abstract

The multiple images of modernity are used here to put forward and corroborate the possibility of the genesis of multiple modern civilizations and their very modernity while confirming the prior existence of modern Western civilization. In examining the complexity, inner tensions and contemporary predicaments appearing in the formation and evolution of earlier Western modernity, this paper reveals the basic mechanisms of modernity and the various possible approaches to it, that is, the fact that there are more possibilities for modernity other than the Western one. Economic globalization is the first step and the only pathway towards the modernity goals of human society, and any deglobalization or anti-globalization will hinder or check the progress of human society towards the ideal goal of modernity. History and the real-world economy demonstrate that “building a community with a shared future for mankind” is so far a more suitable and more explanatory guiding concept for seeking and approaching the human ideal of modernity; it surpasses existing concepts such as “ecumenicalism,” “cosmopolitanism,” and “globalism,” and is the latest understanding of the modernity of human society in contemporary China.

Keywords: modernity, multiple images, a community with a shared future for mankind

I. Introduction: The Images of the Modernity of Civilization

As is well known, “modernity” is a highly ambiguous theoretical concept, for which we have as yet no exact, uniform, or authoritative definition. It can work as a historical philosophical depiction of human civilization/cultural history (Jaspers, Spengler, Wallerstein, Voegelin, Sherman, etc.¹), representing a modern and “new” evolution of social civilization or feature of modern history in comparison with the concepts of “ancient,” “classical” and so forth. It is also often used to express value judgments on social progressivism (Darwin, Huxley, Comte, and even many contemporary politicians, such as Macron, the current French President, and others) and attitudes of social critique and reflection (Marx, Habermas, MacIntyre, etc.) that

1 See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*; Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vols. 1 and 2; Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 4 volumes; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*; Dennis Sherman *et al.*, *World Civilizations*, 4th ed., vol. 2.

represent an objective empirical analysis and value criticism of the facts of human social development. It can also be viewed as a value orientation formed on the basis of analytical judgments on these two dimensions, one that concerns human beings and their social development in the sense of mentality/psychology-culture/civilization and thus leads to such ideas as “the mentality of modernity” and “a modern orientation.” The very concept of “modernity” has a complex openness that exposes the use of any single sense of the concept to the risk of bias and at the same time constitutes a thorny problem for the fields of modern world history and historical philosophy.

This paper makes comprehensive use of the concept of modernity in the afore-mentioned three senses, with the particular interpretation of its meaning depending on the specific context and the meaning of “contextuality”² in the present text. This is not an ideal research approach, but so far it has been a relatively reliable one for “reflective equilibrium” (Rawls). Therefore, what I call the “multiple images of modernity” has two connotations. One proposes and demonstrates the possibility of the multiple genesis of modern civilizations and their “modernity,” while confirming the fact of the prior or leading role of modern Western civilization. In other words, modernity itself can and should be plural rather than unitary, or to be more precise, it should present and in fact has more or less presented the real possibility of diverse or plural development rather than uniform or unitary development. The other indirectly reveals that the inquiry in this paper offers not only an analysis of modern civilization from the point of view of historical philosophy or reflection on intellectual history, but also a reflection of modern civilization’s cultural or value philosophy and a preliminary comparative analysis of the multiple images of modern civilization. However, the ultimate presentation and objective of our theme is to examine the complexity, internal tension and contemporary predicament of the prior genesis and evolutionary process of Western modernity in such a way as to reveal the basic mechanisms of modernity and the various possible approaches it affords, i.e., approaches to modernity other than the Western one, as seen, for example, in Chinese modernity and its real-world possibilities.

This theme brings up three main questions: 1) Wherein lie the main lessons of the success of Western modernity as a first mover? Or more positively, what can or should we learn from Western modernity? 2) Why is it that Western modernity was not one of a kind? Or what limits the universal validity of Western modernity itself? 3) What are the complex processes and unique features of Chinese modernity and its genesis? Or why is it that Chinese modernity can be “another modernity” (what I call “Chinese modernity”) that differs from Western (especially Anglo-Saxon) modernity? 4) How are we to view the similarities, differences, and tensions between Chinese and Western modernity? Or rather, why is “building a community with a shared future for mankind” a more reasonable, realistic, and universally effective

2 I explain the concept of “contextuality” and its basic implications more precisely in the article “Chinese Philosophical Studies in Modern Contextualization,” published in the *Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*, 2022, no. 3.

concept than the idea of “ecumenicalism” featuring Western modernity and the notions of “cosmopolitanism” or “globalism” to which people have become accustomed?

II. The Image of Western Modernity and Its Inherent Limits

As the pioneer of modern civilization, Western modernity—whether seen as an image from the history of civilization or intellectual history, or as a reference system for the coordinates of the images of modern civilization—is a prime topic for any consideration and discussion of “modernity”; its position as a pioneer merits our full attention.

What, then, is “Western modernity”? A preliminary theoretical answer is that it is made up of such core elements as a market economy, scientific and technological innovation, the era of discovery and colonial expansion, secularization, and urbanization, all of which were guided by the basic values of liberalism and made up of democratic politics based on the individual’s right to freedom. It is manifest in a distinct spirit of liberal individualism and universal rationalism whose core values are “freedom, equality, fraternity (or tolerance), and democracy,” and represents a great achievement of the European Enlightenment starting from the Renaissance and continuing in subsequent centuries, including especially the British Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and Germany’s classical philosophy movement, together with the major contribution to Western modernity made by the United States during the flowering of the later stage of Western capitalism: political democracy. Its basic theory and mode of practice was liberalism plus ecumenicalism/cosmopolitanism plus colonialism or colonial expansion/imperialism, plus the values of human rights and democracy. At its spiritual heart was West-centric individual liberalism and social Darwinism.

The genesis and development of Western modernity’s intellectual history has lasted about five hundred years to date (from the Renaissance to the present), and the historical practice of its civilized society covers over three hundred years (starting from Britain’s Glorious Revolution of 1688 and its Industrial Revolution). Generally speaking, the growth of Western modernity was marked by a baptism of blood and fire. It can be said to have weathered all kinds of trials and hardships and to have enjoyed alone “the glory and the dream” of fame and wealth. In terms of material wealth, the Industrial Revolution “created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together”³ within less than a hundred years. Of course, at the same time Western modernity went through many setbacks and is still experiencing various serious challenges and crises. There is nothing strange about this; it is inevitable that any historical civilized progress and practice underwent tribulations of one kind or another. The question that merits our in-depth research is whether, as some Western scholars claim, the project of Western modernity “has failed” (MacIntyre) or is still “incomplete” (Habermas). If the former, why is this so? If the latter, how is it that

3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Writings of Marx and Engels*, vol. 2, p. 36.

the potential of Western modernity has not been, or even cannot be, fully unlocked? Does this mean that Western modernity itself has limitations and contradictions that are difficult to overcome? Furthermore, how can Western modernity transcend its limits and achieve its value goal of modernity?

Providing an accurate answer to these questions requires a long and arduous inquiry, but first we have to clarify the historical trajectory of the genesis and evolution of Western modernity and then comb through and understand the constituent logic of its modern values.

If the Age of Discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Age of Invention in the 18th and 19th centuries were the two wings of the rise and rapid take-off of modern Western civilization, the rise of the Renaissance in Italy, the final victory of the bourgeoisie in the Glorious Revolution of 17th-18th century Britain, the European Enlightenment centering on France and especially the rapid development and worldwide expansion of the European market economy were the fundamental symbols of the genesis of Western modernity. The rapid succession of voyages over some thirty years constituted the historical Age of Discovery, involving not only the comprehensive discovery of the planet we inhabit but also, at the same time, the discovery of world markets and a totally new modern world. More importantly, it also involved the discovery of man's own energy and power, thus making it worthy of the name of an unprecedented modern development for the human race.⁴

The geographical navigation of the Age of Discovery presented a complete space across the world for Western modernity for the first time, and even a space for the modernization of the whole of human society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Age of Invention in science and technology laid an unprecedented high-speed dimension to world time—compared with the course of traditional society—for the genesis and development of Western modernity and even the modernization of the whole of human society. Not only did it strengthen man's modern-type belief in his own energy and power, it also marked his ultimate discovery of the newest means of improving and changing society and human civilization. A particularly striking demonstration of this is that the great scientific discoveries and technological inventions of 18th-19th century Europe and the rapid development of modern universities, and even the entire European education system, occurred at almost the same time in a process of interlocking advances. In terms of human resources, the emergence of the modern education system is the basic and sufficient condition for the sustainable and rapid development of modern society. Since then, the surge of industrial revolutions led by modern science and technology has become a fundamental marker of the progress of modern civilization.

Moreover, not only did scientific discovery and technological invention foster the industrial revolution in Britain as well as mankind's first wave of modern industrial revolutions;

4 As Marx and Engels pointed out in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, "Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land." (quoted from *Collected Writings of Marx and Engels*, vol. 2, p. 32).

their extensive application and substantial effects in social practice confirmed the scientific contention that “Science and technology are the primary productive forces” (Deng Xiaoping). More importantly, they helped establish the generalizable universal beliefs of scientific rationalism and epistemological principles (scientific rationality and the truth principle), with a far-reaching influence on modern social revolutions and social practice.⁵

Of course, the market economy was the basic driving force for the genesis and growth of Western modernity, and this was particularly striking in Britain from the 17th century on. Europe was the birthplace of modern civilization, but Britain was the first European country to become modern, creating both modern civilization and the amazing “empire on which the sun never sets.” Although it was not the only pioneer of modern civilization and culture, Britain’s primacy lay in the fact in that it was the first to find the key to the market economy, thus opening a “ready gateway” to the creation of modern wealth and the accumulation and application of capital, that is, the operational mode of a market economy based on “economic rationality,” i.e., obtaining as much benefit as possible from the market with the least input in terms of economic cost, thus making the market’s “invisible hand” into a Rubik’s cube of wealth creation. There can be no doubt that Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*⁶ provides classic guidance for the practice of the modern economy. In this work he reveals the secret of the market economy—the magic power of the market as an “invisible hand” that achieves the optimal allocation of resources in the most economical way, or, in other words, that gains the highest economic benefit from the market with the greatest economy of inputs.

Capital and technology both create an impressive flow of wealth. As one of the greatest marvels in the progress of modern human civilization, together with the Age of Discovery and the Age of Invention, this constitutes an achievement that marks the entry of human society into modern civilization.

Over the three centuries and more of the growth of modern Western civilization, it can readily be seen that the enlarged circulation of the market economy provided a fundamental impetus and laid a solid economic base (Marx and Engels) for modern democratic politics to

5 Engels once remarked in particular: “And yet since the middle of the last century England has experienced a greater upheaval than any other country—an upheaval which is all the more momentous the more quietly it is brought about, and it will therefore in all probability attain its goal more readily in practice than the political revolution in France or the philosophical revolution in Germany. The revolution in England is a social one and therefore more comprehensive and far-reaching than any other.” Frederick Engels, “The Condition of England: The 18th Century,” quoted from *Collected Writings of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1, p. 87.

6 The works of Adam Smith (1723-1790), the most famous ethical thinker and economist in 18th century Britain, are represented by *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). The former is regarded as the classic work on moral sentiment of the Scottish Enlightenment, while the latter earned him the honor of being “a pioneer of modern economics.” Smith was recommended by his friend and mentor David Hume to the position of Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow, where he served as Rector in his later years.

eventually eliminate traditional feudal centralization and hereditary politics. The establishment of Western democratic political systems and the successive achievement of social democratic revolutions are fundamental signs indicating that Western modernity had finally managed to complete its social “superstructure.” In this sense, it can be said that the market economy and democratic politics are fairly consistent: the former *inherently* requires that all economic bodies retain independent ownership, that is, have unique products or resources that can be used to participate in market transactions; have the right to trade freely (conduct transactions); and have the right and obligation to take part freely and equally in various market economy activities under market rules. Similarly, the latter also *inherently* requires that all those with legal citizenship status have the right and ability to participate freely and equally in the political life of the state and society, and thus assume the basic political obligations incumbent on citizens. Therefore, free and equal rights and duties—i.e., commitments to justice—are the basic conditions or premises for both the market economy and democratic politics.

However, it should be noted that the market economy and democratic politics also constitute the double-edged sword of Western modernity, possessing the greatest intrinsic value tension and the greatest external aggression, and this is quite different from the Age of Discovery and the Age of Invention. This distinction lies not only in the separation between fact and value (meaning) contained therein, but more importantly in the “man-made” goal-directed value orientations and subjective preferences of modern European and American countries or national interest groups in relation to the market economy and democratic politics, and even in the resultant targeted ideological intervention, for after all, both the market economy and democratic politics are in essence homogenous man-made institutional constructions with subjective goals designed by modern social systems rather than being mainly based on objective facts and the testimony of rational truths as were the Age of Discovery and the Age of Invention.

In market economies, a potential tension exists between economic freedom and capital monopolies. The uncontrolled greed of capital itself is not good tidings but a calamity for freedom. Simply for this reason, preventing and combating market monopolies and capital manipulation has always been a thorny problem for modern nations or governments: the “visible hand” of government regulation of the market will, if excessive, hinder the market economy’s natural course, but, if insufficient, will bring about market monopolies and capital manipulation resulting in distorted market effects and social consequences. In extreme cases, this may even trigger economic disorder and social revolution. Similarly, democratic politics, as the basic political system of modern nations, faces many internal tensions or contradictions. The most important of these has two facets: 1) The natural tension between freedom and equality. Specifically, it is impossible for each citizen’s right to freedom and the political demands this entails to be fully realized simultaneously with the political demands entailed by the universal equality of the whole body of citizens. The modern political philosopher, John Rawls, had to have “lexically ordered” freedom and equality in his theory of justice; that is, in

normal circumstances, the individual citizen's claims on or right to freedom takes priority over claims for the equality of the citizen body as a whole. That was his latest theoretical attempt to relieve the tension in question, and is also a piece of evidence for the objective existence of such tension.⁷ 2) The second is the tension or even separation between the institutional form of governance that can be summed up as procedural democracy and the social practice of substantive democracy. Specifically, Western democratic politics is increasingly becoming formalized as a "voting democracy" of "one person, one vote," but the powerful inroads and manipulation of capital cliques or interest groups mean that voting democracy as absolute fairness has become an electioneering activity that is losing its substantive democratic meaning. It has seemingly ensured "equality of starting points" and "procedural justice," but is getting further and further away from substantive "justice of outcomes." This can easily be seen through a simple review of the recent presidential elections in the United States.⁸

When it comes to the relationship between the market economy and democratic politics, such tensions or contradictions are even more tangled and complicated. The right to freedom of all economic agents and fair trade between them undoubtedly provide the basic social premise and political (institutional) conditions for the operation of any market economy. However, owning resources or capital that can be independently disposed of or transacted is also the material premise or necessary condition for economic agents to take part in economic activities and carry out free and equal transactions. In its absence, the market economy must likewise be a tree with no roots. The problem, however, is that it is simply hard to equalize people's actual possession or disposition of capital and resources when there are so often huge disparities between them, with some owning little or even nothing. With such an unequal socioeconomic basis, how can a true political democracy be possible?

From the beginning, what facilitates and accompanies the modernization represented by the scientific and technological revolution, the market economy and democratic politics and benefits from these things, is the secular development of Western society since early modern times: the basic elements of modernity, namely the spirit of rationality fostered by science and technology, the wave of commercialization and the individual rights-oriented liberalism on which democratic politics relies, jointly launched a social movement of sustained secularization in Western society, a movement that not only constituted the ethos of Western modernity in terms of societal ethics,⁹ but that is seen as the advent of a Secular Age, the most revolutionary social outcome of Western modernity.¹⁰ In fact, all these social movements, from the secularization represented

7 For details, see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice; Political Liberalism*.

8 I would like to specifically mention the 2000 US presidential election: Al Gore, the Democratic candidate, actually gained more popular votes than the Republican candidate George W. Bush, but lost the presidential race simply because he received fewer electoral votes. The problem is that this kind of thing is not accidental and exceptional, but has occurred several times.

9 See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in the 12th volume of the *Collected Writings of Max Weber*.

10 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, especially Part III and Part IV.

by the Renaissance in the 13-16th centuries to the atheistic philosophy of the radical French Enlightenment thinkers of the 18-19th centuries, and thence to the Marxist theoretical standpoint that religion is simply the “opium of the people,” display the evolutionary traces of this lasting secularization. The individual liberalism or liberal individualism widely recognized as the spiritual symbol of Western modernity is not only the main driver of spiritual secularization in Western society, but also its main spiritual and cultural fruit.

To sum up, we can already obtain a broadly clear picture of the genesis of Western modernity and its intellectual logic: a Western modernity conceived in geographical expansion (the Age of Discovery) and its scientific and technological revolution (the Age of Invention), which eventually created the modern world system or modern world history through the rapid emergence of the market economy in Europe and its growing worldwide expansion combined with the success in Europe and America of the blessings of democratic politics and the sustained movement for a secular society. In this way, the West was the forerunner and dominant force in modern human society for nearly five hundred years, thus, in a certain sense, making “Western modernity” a synonym for modern human history. Scanning the massive, complex and changing process of modern history, we must admit that Western modernity did indeed accumulate some successful experience with modernization that merits study by the rest of the world, and that likewise contains or implies a logic of Western modernity that can serve as a warning and a subject of reflection. So far as the former is concerned, the clear and complete concept of the world (the earth) based on the Age of Discovery, the scientific rationalism established on the basis of modern technology, the core value concepts of liberalism and egalitarianism rooted in the market economy and constantly strengthened through democratic politics, and the popular secular culture developed through the continuous enhancement of secularization, together constitute the most basic achievements of Western modernity in the field of civilization and culture as well as its basic spiritual wealth. Of these features, those most deserving of attention and study are such modern qualities as the spirit of the pursuit of strength and progress and free innovation, fair competition and equitable cooperation among various actors, and the principle of scientific and public rationality, i.e., such qualities as the modern spirit of the principle of order of universal justice.

In terms of the latter, our attention should likewise be drawn to the reverse side implicit in the evolutionary logic of Western modernity. Specifically, it is expressed in: 1) The expansion of the logic of rights directed at the possession of territories, resources, capital, and wealth. Legitimate claims are justifiable, but when they are distorted into the exclusive possession of power or monopolistic hegemony, even claims based on so-called “natural law” will be degraded into an authoritarianism that claims that “Might makes right” or the hegemonic logic of the “will to power” (Nietzsche). These make it difficult to present a defense of universal legitimacy. 2) The social Darwinian logic of one-way claims—rather than the principle of equivalence of rights and duties—and the will to power. Darwin’s theory of evolution is a

landmark achievement of modern biological (life) science. Unfortunately, this great natural science achievement was simplistically appropriated as a standard for evaluating the progress of human civilization. Together with the teleology of Western Christianity, it catalyzed the views of modern progressivism. The theory of biological evolution follows three basic principles: natural selection, survival of the fittest, and optimal survival of the fittest, which jointly constitute the evolutionary chain in which all kinds of (living) organisms, including human beings, evolve from low to high levels under the “natural law” of evolution. However, if the principle of biological evolution is applied to human civilization, it may be generically applied as social Darwinism or even as the behavioral laws of imperialism, and the struggle for a high or prime (first) position will become a natural and inevitable behavioral logic. However, this logic conflicts with the human community’s civilized pursuit of common survival and development. An objective fact worth pondering is that the last five hundred years or so of modern Western history was indeed, in a sense, more of a history of arenas of competition and war, in which new and old empires succeeded one another.¹¹ 3) The logic of capital monopolies aims at unlimited profit. It is the nature of capital to reproduce itself infinitely and pursue market monopolies, but capital itself has no innate value preferences, just as science and technology themselves are “borderless,” or “value neutral.” However, the application of capital in the market inevitably produces variant or even diametrically opposed market and social effects, so that it acquires social value attributes in the same way as the social application of science and technology. Once capital enters the market and loses the necessary constraints, it reveals its gaping appetite for unlimited market appreciation and market monopolies, and even infiltrates other areas of social life to maximize its own social value. In other words, once capital’s market operation loses the necessary social constraints or government oversight, it may infiltrate the social, political, economic, and cultural fields, displaying a ruthless and unscrupulous market power and sparking capital wars in the political arena (especially in international politics). This phenomenon has become more and more noticeable in modern international financial and political crises, showing that the capital logic of Western modernity has always proceeded through some form of the logic of monopoly and hegemony. 4) Forming a uniform or even egocentric logic of self-interest by imposing an ideology of competition or preferential possession of resources and capital based on the above standpoints. The universalism advocated by the British Empire; the so-called “Liberation of Asia” and “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” of the Empire of Japan; and the classic democratic and human rights movements and “color revolutions” that the US has bent its utmost efforts to promote are all the logical embodiment of this imperialist ideology.

Historical philosophy reminds us of an issue that needs clarification: Western modernity

11 This can readily be seen in such events as the repeated competition for maritime hegemony between the Netherlands and Spain in the 14th and 15th centuries, the naval battle between Spain and England in the 16th century, the two world wars in the first half of the 20th century, and even the East-West “Cold War,” as well as repeated wars in the Middle East and the present Russia-Ukraine war.

cannot simply be regarded as an essentialist concept, for it is first and always a complex multi-dimensional historicist one. Therefore, we must take care not to simplify Western modernity into American modernity, even if the US has since the 20th century almost become the “plenipotentiary representative” of Western modernity. Nor can we ignore the inherent similarities and differences between American and Western modernity because of the fact of America’s being a “plenipotentiary representative” in terms of actual operations. On the one hand, even European modernities, in the matrix of Western modernity, are not absolutely identical; rather, they are a variegated jigsaw of modernity containing internal differences and diversity. On the other hand, the United States of America, as a powerful capitalist country that came from behind, has indeed successfully drawn to a large extent on the experience it gained as a “newcomer” to develop and jointly build a new type of modern country. This is especially true of its uniquely diverse experience in democratic political life. In doing so, it has provided new experiences, ideas and methods for the growth of Western modernity, and more importantly, has sustained and improved modern Anglo-Saxon democratic politics and secular culture.¹² However, whether viewed historically or as a totality, one cannot deny that Western modernity, as a social model jointly constructed by European and American capitalist countries that acts as a force for the homogenization of civilization, does enjoy the historical advantage of being a forerunner or first comer and plays a widespread role as a global model.

III. Chinese Modernity: Another Possible Reality

Western modernization was in the lead historically for more than three hundred years. This constitutes the modern period of human history; indeed, it displays the unprecedented vitality and high standards that made it a basic direction for the progress of human civilization. This means that all non-Western countries and regions that wish to cross the threshold of modernization need to start by learning from, catching up with and even, at given periods, imitating the Western mode of modernization so as to set out on their own progress to modernization. This does not mean, however, that each non-Western country or region can and must pursue the path of modernization taken by the Western countries in every particular, or even that they must forever follow in its footsteps, for even their initial imitation and learning cannot be simplistically equated with adoption, or even with direct transplantation. On the contrary, a more realistic picture is that different countries and regions can and must only carry out their various modernizations in accordance with where they stand historically, with their social conditions, and with the possible means and resources for modernization at their disposal. This is demonstrated by the actual circumstances of each country’s modernization. This conclusion can be defended on the basis of at least three basic facts: first, the modernization of Western societies did not follow exactly the same pattern even though they generally shared a spirit of modernity. Western European countries varied not

12 See Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind*.

only in terms of when they started modernizing and the particular routes they chose, but in the differing outcomes of their modernization. For example, the construction of modern states went through a variety of political forms, including constitutional monarchies, liberal democracies or democratic republics, and social democracies. Similarly, although all were grounded on market economies, they exhibited diverse value orientations including liberal capitalism, welfare capitalism and even state capitalism. This proves that modernity has from the very beginning involved a variety of possibilities and shown diversified growth trends. Second, such diversity, which has become increasingly prominent in international modernization, is inseparable from the unique social and historical conditions and civilization/cultural traditions of each country. Clearly, the United States, as a latecomer that became the youngest modernized country in Western modernity, has taken a path of modernization that is quite different from that of the first movers in Europe. Historically, its most noteworthy contribution to Western modernity came from its provision of an open knowledge innovation system and its experience of open political democracy. In particular, the former inherited and carried forward the spirit of modernity, namely scientific rationalism, while the latter represents the political experience of the United States alone. Some parts of American political experience merit study, others do not; indeed, its unique experience as a “nation of immigrants,” cannot easily be simply emulated or transplanted. Tocqueville made timely and perceptive observations of these two facets of America’s democratic experience.¹³ Third, apart from Europe and America, non-Western pre-modern countries and regions have also sought to modernize. Their modernization practice evinces different motivations, path choices, developmental courses and actual outcomes. Some (such as Japan, South Africa, etc.) actively follow the example of Western countries, some (such as India) are passively transplanted; some progress incrementally, some took leaps ahead; and some set up new institutions, while others go by the book. In a word, their modes and outcomes are quite, with some even hugely, different.

There can be no doubt that Chinese modernity’s origins likewise had their own special background and motivations, and that China’s experience with modernization so far has been unique and hard to copy simplistically. From the “sprouts of capitalism” in the modern sense seen in the handicraft industry and commerce that appeared around the Southeast China coast in the 16th century or so,¹⁴ to “the collapse of the Celestial Dynasty” at the beginning of

13 See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vols. I and II, especially the second volume. The author lays particular emphasis on the critical significance of the American people’s “equality of conditions” for the construction of American political democracy. In fact, Americans’ “equality of conditions,” in their original conditions as joint “newcomers,” by chance and necessity laid a “natural” foundation for the political conditions of a negative social contract in American democratic politics. It was precisely these conditions that were lacking in European countries such as France. This meant that it has been difficult for the American experience or style of democratic politics to be simplistically imitated, let alone directly transferred.

14 Quoted from Li Bozhong, *Early Industrialization in the Yangtze Delta, 1550-1850*.

the 20th century,¹⁵ Chinese society was soon involved in the social transformation in which was interwoven a “double variation on enlightenment and national salvation.”¹⁶ However, the modernization of Chinese society did not shift from a passive and unconscious state to an active and conscious dash for change and strength until the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). China’s tragic defeat had such a strong effect that it ended up alerting the whole of Chinese society from top to bottom: the traditional “Celestial Dynasty” as a world center or “central empire” no longer existed, and those who lagged behind were bound to be victims, even if admitting to being a laggard was very painful. The fundamental way to leave backwardness behind and grow strong was not only to conduct reform at the level of equipment and technology, but to introduce a substantial change in the political system. In a manner of speaking, therefore, it was China’s disastrous defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War that directly triggered the Hundred Days’ Reform in 1898. Moreover, it was the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reform that directly catalyzed the cultural soul-searching and intellectual enlightenment of the next decades, or what we might term modern enlightenment in conceptual terms. That was the main reason the May Fourth Movement followed shortly after and soon gained momentum. One could say that the three-step transformation from “equipment” to “political system” and thence to “ideas” shaped the three-tiered launching point or incremental form of the modern transformation of Chinese society from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Given this social background and historical preconditions, the unique features of the birth and growth of Chinese modernity were predetermined: the passive or borrowed modernization of society; the rapid self-awareness and marked strengthening of a consciousness of national survival and independence; the imperfect mechanisms for internal growth and insufficient preparation of resources; the weakness of modern science and technology; the inadequate enlightenment of modern thought; the cowardliness of the national bourgeoisie; the weakness of modern commercial capital, and so on. All these jointly predetermined that China, as a pre-modern “nation-state,” had to undertake a dual mission of independence and modern development.

The arduous course of China’s modernization determined the lateness of its maturity and its tragic sufferings and fate. The frustration of the early democratic revolution and internecine fighting among warlords during this period, the cruel disruption and damage caused by the Anti-Japanese War and World War II, the serious “internal injuries” caused by the fact that the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China, the especially grievous ten-year calamity of the Cultural Revolution and the ideological confrontation between Western capitalist and Eastern socialist societies, as well the constant associated pressure and

15 Quoted from Mao Haijian, *The Collapse of the Celestial Dynasty: A Restudy of the Opium War*.

16 This is one of the best known of Li Zehou’s famous theories. It originally appeared in his article “Double Variation on Enlightenment and National Salvation,” first published in the journal *Walking Towards the Future*, vol. I (first issue), and later included in his *Essays on Modern Chinese Intellectual History*.

attacks—all these major domestic and international factors meant that Chinese modernization suffered repeated interruptions, stagnation and even reversion to earlier stages of development. One could say that China did not begin to modernize rapidly until the late 1970s; it was only in the subsequent forty plus years that it entered a stage of smooth and rapid development. Thus the course of the country's modernization over the past century was not continuous, let alone smooth, and was constantly troubled by a surfeit of domestic and foreign setbacks. In other words, Chinese society's modernization experience has been gravely inadequate, and consequently Chinese modernity has yet to display itself clearly and fully. That is also a major reason for the fact that the manner and path of Chinese-style modernity is yet to be universally recognized by the international community, although this situation is changing.

Awareness of this background and history is an important *sine qua non* for our understanding of Chinese modernity, thereby enabling us to gain a better appreciation of the preciousness of the hard-earned reform and opening up of the last forty years. The modernization of China in this period has been universally recognized as “the world's economic miracle” but such recognition is still largely confined to economic life, rather than being applied in the full sense of “modernity.” “Modest prosperity in all respects” marked a new stage of China's modernization, that is, a genuine crossing of the threshold of pre-modern society and the beginning of comprehensive socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. This new stage heralds the advent of the gestation and emergence of theories and thinking about Chinese modernity based on the practical experience of socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, exploring and understanding Chinese modernity has swiftly gained attention as the task of the times for contemporary Chinese society and for the self-cognition of the Chinese. More, it is a challenging topic for the contemporary world's renewed appreciation and understanding of China and Chinese modernity. In this regard, clarifying and affirming the genuine image of Chinese modernity and integrating it into the world landscape of modernity is not only timely but particularly urgent and critical.

This emerging Chinese modernity comes from the practical experience of Chinese modernization, especially of socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics. Since it is in its preliminary stages, in some respects its potential and characteristics are not yet fully apparent, and some areas are still tenuous and unclear. However, its main elements and basic characteristics have become clearly visible, as shown below. 1) The continuous opening of the market economy and the expansion of globalization. On the one hand, China's economic development has entered the new stage of modest prosperity in all respects, eradicating absolute poverty and beginning to approach the level of a mid-level developed country. This has put an end to the backwardness and vulnerability the country had suffered since the mid-19th century. At the same time, China has become the largest trading country of the world's 130 countries and regions and currently has the highest quantity of global imports and exports. In particular, its trade volume with each of three major economies—those of

ASEAN, the European Union and the United States—has reached more than 800 billion US dollars. This display of China’s vital economic development is unprecedented in the history of modern international trade. 2) A high degree of national political independence, “whole-process people’s democracy” and increasing international political influence. Historical experience has convinced us that a country’s political independence and the construction of a people’s democracy depend first and foremost on the national strength of the nation-state and the participation, unity, and cooperation of the whole people. At the same time, it is only by continuously strengthening economic hard power and political and cultural soft power that we can ultimately strive for and ensure the political independence and equal international status of China as a nation-state. “Confidence in the path, theory, system and culture of socialism” is a sign of a country’s national political autonomy and its strength in international political integration. Together with firm opposition to engaging China “from a position of strength”¹⁷ and adherence to fairness and justice in international cooperation on an equal footing, global multi-polarity on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and “working together to build a community with a shared future for mankind,” this confidence has helped shape China’s basic value position in diplomacy and has won it increasing international recognition. 3) The rapid growth and upgrading of a complete system of modern industrial manufacturing and the basic mode of modern production, i.e., modern social development, characterized by knowledge innovation and technological improvements. As a country that currently possesses the world’s most complete modern industrial system or “manufacturing chain,” China has achieved rapid industrialization in the sense of catching up and overtaking others, and by means of full awareness of such frontier fields of science and technology as information networking, big data, biological engineering, new materials, new ecology, etc., has pursued the transformation of S&T from scale and quantity to content and quality. In doing so, China has put great effort into various cutting-edge fields of modern S&T, creating a new pattern of increasingly robust and active development and entering a new stage of social development with highly technological, intelligent, digital, and information-based features. 4) The new concept of cultural development and the growing perfection of a national education system. Human qualities such as modern knowledge, capabilities, and culture are the fundamental symbol and ultimate proof of modernization. Over the seventy odd years since the founding of the PRC, and especially over the forty years of reform and opening up, Chinese education has developed with unprecedented speed, scale, and quality. Official statistics show that China’s fiscal investment in education exceeds four percent of its annual national fiscal revenue. As a result, the gross enrolment rate of basic education

17 According to Xinhua News Agency, at the China-US high-level strategic dialogue held in Anchorage, Alaska, on March 18-19, 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken proposed that the United States speak “from a position of strength.” The Chinese Chief Delegate, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China Central Commission, Yang Jiechi, immediately responded forcefully by saying that “This is not the way to deal with the Chinese people.”

currently exceeds 95 percent, the country produces over ten million college graduates each year, and the proportion of college students in the national population has increased rapidly, approaching that of a mid-level developed country. At the same time, the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government have taken “creative transformation and innovative development”¹⁸ as a fundamental policy in the correct handling of the fine traditional Chinese culture, thereby really providing a genuine answer to the thorny cultural issue that had been hanging unresolved for century since the May Fourth/New Culture Movement. 5) The wisdom of the environmental philosophy of “Beautiful China” and the slogan of “green and low carbon” as an ethical position for the global environment. Compared with the history of most of the early industrial modernizers, China, although it was initially no exception to the “labor pains” epitomized in the saying that “great development brings great pollution,” was able in a relatively short period to dispose of such pains and enter a phase of constructing an environmental civilization. As part of the five development concepts of “innovation, harmonization, green, openness and sharing,” the construction of such a civilization is regarded as one of the five strategic goals for China’s modern development. At the same time, as “a responsible major country,” China has been active in participating in and making operative the global environmental mission, playing an important role in international environmental protection activities that include the signing of the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. In fact, China has achieved a great deal in less than twenty years in terms of its construction of environmental civilization, surpassing expectations and deeply impressing the rest of the world.

China’s successful modernization experience covers far more than these five areas, but even if one considers only these areas, China’s modernization experience and the spiritual modernity it epitomizes are attracting ever greater attention from the world. However, Chinese modernity shows many highly important and even fundamental differences from Western modernity in terms of its inherent qualities and distinctive spirit. To truly discern and grasp such important and even fundamental differences, we need to make not only a sufficiently powerful “self-assertion,” “self-argumentation,” and “self-justification” at the level of theory and thought, but more importantly, we need to use objective, real, and relatively full and complete cross-cultural comparisons to highlight the uniqueness, effectiveness and, most importantly, the legitimacy and rationality of Chinese modernity.

18 As early as February 24, 2014, when Xi Jinping presided over the 13th Collective Study of the Politburo of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, he emphasized that to carry forward the fine traditional Chinese culture, “we should properly handle the relationship between inheritance and creative development, with the focus on transforming and developing fine traditional Chinese culture in a creative way.” This speech was included in the book *The Governance of China*. Soon afterwards, in his speeches such as the “Speech at the Opening Meeting of the International Academic Symposium in Commemoration of the 2565th Anniversary of the Birth of Confucius and the Fifth General Assembly of the International Confucian Federation” on September 24 of the same year, he repeatedly emphasized this assertion. See Institute of Party History and Literature of the CPC Central Committee, ed., *Excerpts from Xi Jinping’s Discussion on Socialist Cultural Construction*, p. 5, etc.

IV. Remaining Remarks: The Overlap and Divergence of Chinese and Western Modernity

Comparing Chinese and Western modernity is not only a popular approach and method of researching Chinese modernity, but also one that is typically meaningful and thus effective. Below, we select the four areas of the economy, politics, science and technology and culture for a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western modernity. However, in view of the excessive complexity and breadth of the topic, our analysis can only give an outline at the macro level.

Unlike the Western expansionary market economy mode which prioritizes individual liberalism on the basis of individual freedom/concentration on rights and of capital/interests, the Chinese market economy is an open one based on balancing efficiency and equity, rights and responsibilities, and fair competition between public and private capital. It therefore advocates and implements the combined efforts of the “visible hand” of an active government and the “invisible hand” of the free market. This synergy means 1) opening the market, encouraging the free flow of capital, and emphasizing social cooperation with ample competition but also rational order. 2) Encouraging the free flow and efficient market allocation of capital but also preventing monopoly capital and capital’s limitless social erosion or even political interference. For example, we need to encourage all market economy approaches that help achieve the rational allocation of market resources and effective development, especially the free and orderly development of small and medium-sized enterprises and private enterprise; prohibiting the politicization of capital’s power and influence and of capital groups representing its interests; and preventing capital from commercializing politics and culture. 3) Preventing state/government intervention in free market operation by means of non-market economy methods; adhering to the “decisive role” of the market, and at the same time legitimately and reasonably restricting the “gaping jaws” of the spontaneous expansion of capital so as to prevent it from eroding or injuring national politics, social culture, and social equity. In short, the basic characteristic and major symbol of the market economy with Chinese characteristics is saying yes to a market economy but no to a market society,¹⁹ and bringing into play the joint role of the “visible hand” of an active government and the “invisible hand” of the free market.

Unlike the West’s “one person, one vote” and “electoral democracy” based on multi-party competition and unlike the West’s imperialist politics of self-aggrandizement and international expansion, the political democracy of Chinese modernity has two outstanding characteristics. Political democracy in modern China is based on the core concept that “the people run the country,” that is, the fundamental political concept that President Xi Jinping presented in his important *Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China*

19 A learned saying runs, “Yes to a market economy, no to a market society.” It can be found in Saad Nagi, “Toward a Global Community of Solution,” in Jacques Baudot, ed., *Building A World Community: Globalisation and the Common Good*. Here I simply draw on its meaning.

as being “This country is its people; the people are the country.”²⁰ It emphasizes the people’s autonomy and universality in national politics; that is, the Communist Party, as the ruling party, must always adhere to the people’s democratic politics that takes “wholeheartedly serving the people” as its highest political aim. In view of the historical experience of China as a nation-state, especially the historical experience of the Chinese nation since the mid-nineteenth century of crippling tribulations, the democratic politics of modern China has always emphasized and adhered to the principle of national political independence and equality among all sovereign states. In response to China’s continuously increasing national strength and the constant heightening of the expectations of the international community, President Xi Jinping put forward the new proposition of “building a community with a shared future for mankind.” Through the international development strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping emphasizes and seeks to advance multipolar international justice and international democratic equality, while opposing uniformity or unipolar hegemony. Put simply, upholding and improving “whole-process people’s democracy” and multipolar and equal international democracy while opposing unipolar international hegemony and imperialism are the two basic dimensions of socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics and constitute the internal requirements and external propositions for the development of such democracy. This “people’s democracy” is more rational, fairer, and more sustainable than the West’s so-called “human rights and democracy” that treats with partiality or throws its weight behind first this then that.

Modern scientific and technological rationality is a significant contribution of Western modernity to modern human civilization; more than that, it is a symbolic achievement through which modern civilizations have surpassed ancient civilizations and totally surpassed them. It is thanks to rapid scientific and technological progress that modern society can create unprecedentedly abundant material civilization and a completely new spirit of scientific rationality. In this regard, China has always believed in and pursued the concepts of “learning from the West” and “learning from the most advanced” since it started modernizing. From the principle of “adopting whatever comes to hand” to the increasing scale of the overseas study movement, China’s original aspiration to learn from the most advanced has never changed. At this point, it is not so much a question of the increasing overlap and decreasing difference between Chinese and Western modernity as a question of the way scientific and technological rationality has become the most commensurable basic level of modernity in human society. Opening up, innovating, and learning with an open mind constitute valuable experience acquired from advanced modern countries, in conjunction with the experience we have created and accumulated through China’s continuous reform and opening up.

Culture is the spiritual heart of civilization. Civilizations may converge, but cultures cannot, for cultures are always and above all national, local, and even “lineage-based” systems of tacit knowledge and values/beliefs rather than knowledge systems that can be homogenized simply

20 Xi Jinping, *Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China*.

by means of theoretical logic. Western research indicates that Western modernity is rooted in two traditions, the ancient Hebrew religious tradition and ancient Greek philosophy, and is characterized by the ecumenical gene of Christian nominalism and the dichotomy of ancient Greek philosophy, that is, the tragic character of the dialectical dichotomous conflict of ancient Greek philosophy. It essentially belongs to an outgoing progressive type of culture.²¹ In contrast, Chinese traditional culture, as the cultural predestination and premise of Chinese modernity, is mainly the syncretism or integration of the three schools of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. It is dominated by Confucianism, but at the same time is open to heterogeneous foreign cultures. In the context of world modernity, how do we deal with the conflict and dialogue between Chinese and Western culture and how do we handle the “creative transformation” and “innovative development” of traditional Chinese culture? These remain urgent real-world problems for modern Chinese culture. Dialogue, exchange and mutual understanding between Chinese and Western modernity can become possible only when these problems are solved; in other words, efforts directed at the “creative transformation and innovative development” of fine traditional Chinese culture and at the same time directed at open dialogue and cultural sharing with multiple foreign cultures constitute the modern developmental mode of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics and will remain so in the long run.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the complex modern concept of “modernity” remains open, and no person or group has the right to monopolize its definition and interpretation. On the contrary, every civilized country or region is qualified to enrich or revise the connotations, understanding and expression of the concept of modernity in accordance with its own experience of the practice of modernization. Nevertheless, while the goal of modernity is and should be commensurable and comprehensible, the ways it is realized or defined can—in fact can only—be differentiated and diversified. We here borrow the Western saying, “all roads lead to Rome”; although there is only one Rome, a variety of roads can lead to the same destination. It is necessary and natural for the diversity of human civilization, the multipolar nature of international politics and the diversity of human culture to allow a variety of “modernities” and practical approaches to them.

Economic globalization is the first step and only route to the goal of the modernity of human society. Any deglobalization and anti-globalization will hinder or even check the progress of human society towards the ideal goal of modernity. In the absence of economic globalization propositions and practice, modernity can only be the modernity of particular regions or groups, and thus lacks universal human significance, even though the concepts and practice of globalization itself show a trend toward diversity and pluralism.²² As history and

21 See Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, especially “Introduction: The Concept of Modernity.”

22 Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, especially Peter L. Berger, “Introduction: The Cultural Dynamics of Globalization.”

practical experience have proved, “building a community with a shared future for mankind” is so far the most appropriate and explanatory guiding concept for seeking and approaching the ideal “modernity” of the human race, and is superior in terms of theoretical power and explanatory thoroughness to ecumenism, cosmopolitanism, and globalism. It represents the latest understanding of human modernity in contemporary China, and also China’s solemn commitment to the building of a new type of international relations and a new type of community for mankind.

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