reporter: What do you think of Western civilization?

Gandhi: It would be a good idea.

According to the guidelines provided to those applying for U.S. citizenship, a person may decline to take the oath of loyalty to the U.S. Constitution if this oath conflicts with a religious belief. Despite the nation-state’s prerogative to make deep claims upon the loyalty of its citizens, it often recognizes that the highest truths are not necessarily to be found within the national community, but in a transcendent or universal realm. Indeed, nations tend to recognize the superiority of religious truths because their own raison d’être is often founded in a spiritual or universal truth. The discourse of civilization in the era of nation-states is closely tied to this yearning for a transcendent spiritual purpose.

This essay deals with the transformations in the discourse of civilization in the twentieth century and its complex relationship with nationalism, particularly in East Asia. Nationalism and racism were not the only sources of identity in the twentieth century. For many millions of people in the world, the older spiritual and religious ideals incorporated in a new conception of civilization continue to be an

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even more potent source of moral authority. The essay considers the ways in which the ideas of Asian civilization, East Asian civilization, and eastern civilization were expressed, realized, and embodied in various intellectual, political, cultural, and social movements during the interwar years in East Asia. The critical problem in understanding civilization during this period is the extent to which it could be identified with or appropriated by a nationalist goal. Although nationalism, too, sought its ultimate meaning in civilization, it tried equally to manipulate it for expansionist purposes. As long as nationalists were able to deploy civilization as a supplement to nationalism, the civilizational idea could scarcely realize its promise as the higher authoritative principle from which the nation-state itself could be judged.

Part I: A Genealogy of Civilization

The relationship between nations and civilizations transformed sometime during or at the end of the First World War. From the late nineteenth century until that time, the signifier Civilization had become established as a singular and universal phenomenon in much of the world (Gong 1984, 12). During this period, Western imperial nations invoked the signifier to justify their conquest as a civilizing mission. Whole continents were subjugated and held in thrall because they were not constituted as civilized nations by means of a formulation where to be a nation was to be civilized and vice versa. To be sure, the idea that there were civilizations other than that of Europe or of Christianity had been around from at least the eighteenth century; during the nineteenth century, however, the singular conception of Civilization based originally upon Christian and Enlightenment values came not only to be dominant but to be the only criterion whereby sovereignty could be claimed in the world. In this way, it also became clear that to be a nation was to belong to a higher, authorizing order of civilization.

Arising in the context of European domination of the non-Western world this conception could be specifically found in the legal language of various “unequal treaties” and its interpretation by the international lawyers of the time. At an explicit level, the term Civilization in these treaties and interpretations referred principally to the ability and willingness of states to protect life, property, and freedoms as rights (particularly for foreigners), but this usage necessarily also presupposed and demanded the existence of the institutions of the modern European state, and its goals, values, and practices, ranging from the pursuit of material progress to Civilized manners and clothing. By the late nineteenth century, international law and its standard of “civ-
ilization” became increasingly positivist and reflected the social Darwinist conception that certain races were more civilized than others. The renowned scholar of international jurisprudence, James Lorimer, declared, “No modern contribution to science seems destined to influence international politics and jurisprudence . . . as ethnology, or the science of races” (quoted in Gong 1984, 49). While a hierarchy of races with different capacities to achieve civilization seemed natural, it should be noted that the notion of Civilization did not theoretically preclude the ability of a “race” to become civilized.¹

At the same time, from the late nineteenth century onward, an alternative formulation of civilization was developing within the penumbra of this hegemonic conception. Assuming various inchoate shapes at the intersections of multiple discourses, it would not become recognizable and dominant until the end of the First World War. Most significant among these discourses in East Asia were the older imperial Chinese conception of wenming, the Christian and particularly Jesuit valorization of Chinese civilization, the Orientalist studies of Sir William Jones and others in Calcutta, the world Buddhist revival, and the Herderian notion of Kultur, among others (Schwab 1984; Bunzl 1996; Ketelaar 1990; Bechert 1984). Douglas Howland has elegaically documented the death of the imperial Chinese notion of the civilized world or wenming when the exchanges between Chinese and Japanese diplomats conducted through “brush-talk,” signifying mastery—and thereby affirmation—of the world of the written character, became evidently irrelevant to the Japanese and the world around them. Nonetheless, even as Fukuzawa Yukichi was exhorting Japan to escape from Asia (datsua) and become Civilized, both Japanese and Chinese were reworking vestigial expressions of the old Chinese notions of common civilization (tongwen/dōbun, tongjiao/dōkyō) as well as improvisations upon these ideas influenced by contemporary social Darwinism, for example, the neologism tongzhong/dōshu or common race (Howland 1996, 262 n.22; Reynolds 1993, 22, 28). While these efforts at the turn of the century may have represented an effort to create an alternative East Asian civilization, they were still closely associated with the social Darwinist ideas underlying Civilization. At any rate they did not make much headway.

Also relevant to the transformation of the conception of civiliz-

¹ The embodiment of Civilization in legal form had the effect of universalizing it, or in other words, of disassociating it from the particular soil or conditions of its emergence (such as Christianity) in the West. It was in this particular legal incarnation that countries like Japan and Turkey could aspire to the status of a Civilized nation and, indeed, sought very hard to do so.
tion was the emergence of the idea of a world religion. Heinz Bechert has identified the emergence of “Buddhist modernism” in the last quarter of the nineteenth century beginning with the Christian-Buddhist debates in Sri Lanka, the initiatives taken by Sri Lankan Buddhists and their Western supporters in the Theosophical Society, and the forging of international links between Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Japan, and the West. Indeed, Sri Lankans and Japanese Buddhist thinkers have remained in the forefront of contributions to contemporary Buddhist thought (Bechert 1984, 274–275).2 In East Asia, James Ketelaar has demonstrated how Buddhism could survive the persecution of a new Shinto national cult during the Meiji period only by refashioning itself as a “world religion.” In all of these cases, the end product resembled much less any particular or lived experience of Buddhism or Hinduism than an abstract, rationalized, modernized, and, perhaps most of all, Christianized body of thought that served to represent the core of another civilization. Central to this development was the 1893 Chicago Congress of World Religions in which each of these traditions first gained publicity—indeed, were publicly produced as world religions (Ketelaar 1990).3

Finally, there is a European—specifically German—intellectual current, identifiable in part with Herder’s notion of Kultur/culture that transmuted into the new idea of civilization by the end of the Great War. Herder’s notion of Kultur is well known and I will trace no more than its broad outlines here.4 This intellectual tradition can, significantly, be found in what may be the most important intellectual statement of the new conception of civilization, Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West. Ironically, if not unexpectedly, Spengler does not refer to the entities of his world history as Civilizations, but Cultures or Kultur. This is because he reserves Civilization for a stage, the final stage, the frozen stage of a dynamic, evolving Culture.5 At any rate, for our purposes, his cultures are equivalent to what we have been calling the alternative conception of civilization: multiple, spiritual, and—as the highest expression of a people’s achievements, virtues, and authentic-

2 The same reconstruction of Hinduism was taking place in India under the auspices of the Theosophical Society and thinkers like Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda.
3 See Welch for China and Taixu. Despite this remaking in universalist terms, Buddhism continued to play a role in nationalism and imperialism (Ketelaar 1990; Bechert 1984).
4 For the relationship of this notion to the ideas of Humboldt and Boas on culture, see Bunzl.
5 One cannot but be reminded of the German association of the word ‘civilization’ with an effete and superficial French cult of manners and courtesy (see Elias 1978).
ity—authorizing. At the moment of German defeat in war, the Germanic notion of *Kultur* gained a significant victory over the notion of a universal Civilization which measured value only according to certain Western standards of progress.

To be sure, I am not seeking an explanation for the triumph of civilization from the history of ideas. Rather, this triumph must be understood in relation to that other triumph of the world system of nation-states and nationalism, as a global ideology that ironically requires the conception of a transcendent civilization. Spengler’s notions are important partly because they were so influential in global discourse—relayed to the English speaking world in many ways by Arnold Toynbee—and thus constructive of this new discourse of civilization. They clarified the inchoate shapes that had hovered in the penumbra of Civilization. Moreover, I believe it is important to recognize that the new discourse of civilization—especially Eastern civilization—was affirmed in the West before it was confirmed in Asia. In this sense, too, civilization remains a postcolonial concept.

Spengler professes to examine two themes: The narrower one is the decline of the West as a civilization, which as a thing already-become rather than coming-to-be, was predestined to decline; but his study also occasioned a new philosophy—“the philosophy of the future”—of the world-as-history, in contrast to the world-as-nature which had hitherto been the only theme of philosophy (Spengler 1962, 5). In his sweeping vision of the new world history, Spengler lays out the basic features, many of which have endured in our understanding of civilization to this day. First is the critique of linear history based on the ancient-medieval-modern division which sets the stage to make the rest of the world turn around the “little part-world” that is Europe (Spengler, 12). In its place, Spengler traces many mighty Cultures that develop upon the model of organisms, each undergoing its own temporal cycle of rise and decline, and each developing in isolation from the others. Needless to say, a culture cannot be judged from the standpoint of another because “truths are truths only in relation to a particular mankind” (Spengler, 35); also because the goal of history is to seek the relationship that “inwardly binds together the expression—forms of all branches of a culture” (Spengler, 6). Thus does he distinguish the new history from science and in the process confirms the irreducible authority of Culture/civilization.

In Spengler, Culture is a fundamentally spiritual or ideal phenomenon the history of which allows us to grasp its temporal character, its principle of becoming—of the world-as-history. It is this ideational or spiritual quality that authoritatively distinguished it from other Cul-
tures, and would become, or perhaps already reflected, the most salient characteristic of the new conception of civilization. Ideas of Eastern versus Western civilizations which increasingly accompanied the Great War were premised upon this ideal of civilizational spirituality. In the West, the most influential scholar to propagate and develop these ideas was Arnold Toynbee. In the course of over forty years (1920s–1960s) during which he wrote the twelve volumes of *A Study of World History*, Toynbee broke with the vestigial progressivist vision of (essentially Western) civilization and even departed in some measure from Spengler’s view of hermetically closed organic civilizations (McNeill 1989 103, 165; Bentley 1996, 7). But perhaps most significant was his conception of the role of religion in civilizations. In contrast to Gibbon and others, who often associated Christianity with barbarism as the destroyers of Civilization, Toynbee, in his earlier volumes, already viewed religion as a kind of aid to civilization, as a chrysalis which preserved the germs of an older civilization. By the 1940s, he began to see the rise and fall of civilizations as subsidiary to the growth of religion (Toynbee 1948, 230–234). In this way, Toynbee came to reverse earlier notions of Civilization which were frequently founded upon a notion of disenchantment. Thus did Toynbee seek to counter James Fraser’s view of religion in the West—that, according to him, echoed Gibbon’s—as having sapped the manliness of early Europe (Toynbee, 228). For Toynbee, from now on, the goal of history, the historical function of civilization, was to seek ever-deeper spiritual insight (Toynbee, 238–239). In the final years of his life Toynbee was drawn to ideas of a common global civilization originating in the technological achievements of the West, but spiritually regenerated by the major world civilizations. It is not surprising to find his ideas fall on fertile ground in Japan where he was accepted as a major public thinker and conducted a series of dialogues with the leader of the Soka Gakkai, a new religion nourished precisely on such ideas of the blending of East and Western civilizations (McNeill 1989, 269–273).

What were the conditions for the emergence of this new view of civilization? The view surfaced in tandem with the disillusionment produced during the Great War with the idea of the “civilizing mission.” “The nature of the battle on the Western Front made a mockery of the European conceit that discovery and invention were necessarily progressive and beneficial to humanity,” writes Michael Adas (Adas 1993, 109). Writer after writer denounced the materialism and destructiveness of Western Civilization. At the same time, the wider political forces produced by the end of the war and the new balance of power, namely, the beginnings of decolonization, the emergence of new
nation-states, and the concomitant ascendancy of the ideology of anti-imperialism, found little use for Civilization. To many in these nascent movements, Civilization was increasingly seen not only to be compatible with, but to have furnished the moral ground for, imperialism and war. The final triumph of nationalism or national self-determination over imperialism as the hegemonic global ideology was clinched by two political developments: the Soviet revolution and Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of the right to national self-determination in the aftermath of the First War (Barraclough 1964, 118–122). The philosophy of Spengler and Toynbee reflected the world as a newly unified theater of history (Bentley 1996, 3). Spengler’s insistence on seeing Europe as just a bit-part of the history of humanity (rather than its telos) was well suited to a changing world where other actors (nations) had learned the language through which they could demand to be heard. Not only were new nations beginning to emerge all over the world, from the early part of the century, they were also telling their histories in the same linear mode of emergent national subjects linked to classical civilizations. Thus was nationalism genetically linked to a universalism greater than itself, just as globalism itself came to be figured through the language of nationalism.

Notably at the onset of the Second World War, Norbert Elias was to tell us that Europeans had already been subtly transforming the notion of Civilization—at least in relation to each other if not to the world they colonized. Elias defined the idea of civilization thus: “The concept expresses the self-consciousness of the West. One could even say: the national consciousness. It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or ‘more primitive’ contemporary ones. By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of its technology, the nature of its manners, the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more” (Elias 1978, 3–4). Although Elias notes that this civilization allows Europeans to think of themselves transnationally as the “upper-class to large sections of the non-European world” (Elias, 50), he is much more concerned with its transformation within intra-European relationships into “national” civilizations. The German bourgeoisie articulated its role as the leader of the emerging German nation by championing Kultur, which it opposed to the French idea of civilization as merely external and superficial court etiquette (Elias, 29–34). Similarly, the French bourgeoisie in the same century adapted the courtly notion of civilization into a national representation with which it opposed the Germans (Elias, 38–40).
Given the thrust, timing, and references in the work, the reader may well be led to believe that this transmutation of civilization has much to do with the European national wars that enveloped the world in the twentieth century. This may thus prefigure the shift from a singular notion of Civilization to multiple civilizations, at least within Europe. At the same time, I believe that Elias tends to conflate civilization with nation a little too readily, particularly when these nations face societies perceived as radically different. In doing so, he elides a very significant ambiguity in the new conception of civilization: that territorial nations are lesser than the civilizations from which they emanate; that the principle of civilization is generative of value for the territorial nation; that the principle of territoriality may also be in conflict with the principle of civilization; and that nations spend a lot of energy seeking to match the formal sovereignty deriving from territorial or civic nationalism with the source of authenticity or truth of the nation deriving from civilization.

I seek to build my own understanding of the new “civilizations” by reformulating Elias’s insights. First of all, it is necessary not only to sustain but also highlight the distinction implied in Elias’s analysis, between civilization as equal to the nation and civilization as transnational.\(^6\) Indeed, nations require this duality because they often need to move between the two positions. New nations seek the transnational conception of civilization because it is only as a transterritorial, universal ideal—of say, Islam or Confucianism—with its potential capacity to reveal the truth of the human condition and embrace all of humanity, that this (civilizational) self can achieve recognition from the Other. At the heart of the critique of Civilization, launched by both Western and non-Western intellectuals after the Great War, was the betrayal of the universalizing promise of the “civilizing mission”—a mission which exemplified the desire not (simply) to conquer the Other, but to be desired by the Other. In this critique, Civilization had forfeited the right to represent the highest goals or ultimate values of humanity and was no longer worthy of being desired, or even recognized, by the other. In so opposing the legally articulated notion of the good and valuable posed by Civilization, the alternative civilizational

\(^6\) This duality is closely related to another ambiguity in the term: civilization as an achieved state and as civilizing process. Indeed, empirically, Elias’s book is concerned predominantly with the civilizing process as an unselfconscious process before it is transformed into a “concept” of national achievement and superiority. Yet as Raymond Williams points out, despite this transformation in the nineteenth century, the civilizing process does not disappear (Williams 1983, 57–60). As we have seen, this is most evident in the “civilizing mission” idea.
self had to counterpose a still higher good and a truth that was authentically universal. Note here the close relationship, indeed, mirroring, by civilization of the older Western conception of Civilization. It is the spiritual, moral, and universal core of civilizations that furnishes nations with the same kind of authenticating and authorizing function that Civilization furnished for Western imperialist nations. Note further that the gap between the territorial nation and civilization is not only territorial, but principled. Because the spiritual impulse of a civilization tends to be universalizing, national boundaries are ultimately artificial and limiting. The transcendent stance of civilization thus may permit a critique of the nation and, as we shall see, can produce the problem of loyalties divided between those to the nation and those to civilization.\(^7\)

At the same time, there is no doubt that the territorial nation seeks to equate itself with a civilization. Elias is surely right about the role of the bourgeoisie—loosely defined—in formulating this exalted and noble vision of the nation and promoting it as a means of exercising its hegemony both within and without the nation. In this aspect, civilization does become the highly self-conscious ideology of the nation. One might argue that for nations such as China or India, just as for France or England, one can stretch the nation to fit the civilization—territorially, if not in principle. But how can smaller nations do so? I believe there are several narrative strategies within the historiography of nations that can be deployed by many nations to be the true representative or the leader of, if not equivalent to, a certain civilizational tradition. The most powerful of these—at least in terms of its impact on the domestic population—was the Japanese claim of inheriting the leadership of Asian civilization because of its success in mastering Western Civilization; we shall deal with this in the next section. But one can think of how Sri Lankan intellectuals went about constructing a Buddhist civilization in a way that made it the leader of such a project. Consider also the promotion of pre-Columbian civilizations among the relevant Latin American nations or pre-Islamic civilizations among Middle Eastern nations. Civilization in the era of nation-states thus needs to both transcend and serve the territorial nation.

We have noted that civilization both opposes the Civilization of imperialism, but also depends on it in the way that it authorizes this opposition for nations. This is most evident in the selection of those elements and themes from the history of this alleged civilization and

\(^7\) Civilization also enables nation-states to found their sovereignty in a certain timelessness, the eternal or unchanging subject of the linear, changing history of the nation.
their reconstruction in a narrative that will enable it to perform this authorizing function. The basic approach involves combining elements that are a) identical to and b) the binary opposite of the constituents of Civilization. One strategy is to rediscover elements identical to Civilized society within the suppressed traditions of civilization: Confucian rationality, Buddhist humanism, Hindu logic, and so on. Another strategy identifies the opposite of the West in Asian civilizations: “peaceful” as opposed to “warlike,” “spiritual” as opposed to “material,” “ethical” as opposed to “decadent,” “natural” as opposed to “rational,” “timeless” as opposed to “temporal,” and more. Finally, the nation authorizes its opposition to imperialist Civilization by synthesizing or harmonizing the binaries after the equivalence has been established. Thus Western materialism will be balanced by Eastern spirituality and modernity redeemed. Indeed, because the categories of civilization have to be translated into the new lexicon of modernity they are more meaningful to a contemporary sensibility than to the historical society they allegedly represent. In these ways, civilization is always re-made in reference to Civilization. Contemporary analysts, such as Samuel Huntington, whose notion of civilization involves ancient continuities that are, historically and conceptually, pure and closed entities, are, like contemporary nationalists, reifying a relatively recent construction.

Part II: Asian Civilization in Japan and China

The story of how non-Western societies, beginning with Japan, began to overhaul their entire society and cosmology in an effort to become Civilized and sovereign, is a well known one. The Meiji period represented the height of the effort to make Japan a Civilized nation in the name of bummei kaika (Civilization and enlightenment). It is worth reiterating, however, that the roughly ten-year period—between 1894, when it signed the Aoki-Kimberley treaty with Great Britain, and the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905—during which Japan succeeded in reversing the unequal treaties and began to gain access to “Civilized” society, was a time bounded by two successful modern wars (Gong 1984, 190). For equally well-known reasons detailed in histories of the modernization of China, it took nearly fifty more years for China to have its unequal treaties finally abrogated in 1943 and be granted Civilized status. Indeed, the European conception of Civilization did not penetrate Chinese discourses until the turn of the century. The great reformer and historian Liang Qichao was perhaps the most influential advocate of the necessity for China to become Civilized. Liang was
most definitely aware of the legal dimensions of Civilization and sought to make China into a Civilized legal nation even before his exile in Japan following the failure of the 1898 reforms. However, he acquired a fuller understanding of it during his stay in Japan where, influenced by the writings of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Katō Hiroyuki among others, he perceived its significance in relation to the new ideas of History and progress. Nothing could have been further from the Confucian notion of wenming when he wrote, “Competition is the mother of Civilization.” Through the writings of Liang and others, Civilization became, in the words of Ishikawa, a “keyword” in Chinese intellectual discourse by the first decade of the new century, when essays with titles containing phrases such as “civilized revolution,” “civilized drama,” and “civilized races” began to appear among the modern reading community (Liang cited in Ishikawa 1995, 8, 9–10). Beginning from the late Qing reforms at the turn of the century (1902), and certainly from the Republican revolution of 1911, the Chinese regimes tried strenuously to make Chinese laws fully compatible with the general expectation of “Civilized” countries through, for instance, the Revised Law Codification Commission. But because the political situation was beyond real control, these regimes could not implement this legal and political system which, according to the 1926 Commission on Extraterritoriality in China, would make it a Civilized nation (Gong, 157).

But even as the regimes in both countries appeared to embrace the standard of Civilization in order to become fully sovereign, this embrace by no means excluded the development of alternative conceptions of civilization, which, as we have seen, burgeoned particularly during the First World War. Thus, for instance, Zhang Binglin and his admirer Lu Xun quickly saw through the universalist pretensions of Civilization when it was being fervently propagated in the early 1900s. In Japan the notion of an alternate civilization centered around the concept of Asia. Although it was a conception that the Japanese distinctly inherited from the Europeans only in the nineteenth century, it became a powerful, if changing, spatial representation in relation to which Japanese identity came to be repeatedly made and remade (Yamamuro 1994). Among the sharpest critics of Civilization was Okakura Tenshin, who early on perceived the critical link between warfare and Civilization in Japan. Among the first bilingual and bi-cultural thinkers in Meiji Japan, Okakura was able to gain some distance from the frenzied effort to “escape Asia” in Japan and build upon emergent Western ideas of an alternative Asian civilization. The case of Okakura is instructive of the extent to which the “rediscovery” or production of an alternative Asian civilization entailed a deep familiarity with European modes of
constructing the idea of a civilization. Indeed, Okakura’s conversion to Asian civilization came during his first voyage to Europe which turned out to be a voyage of self-discovery. To be sure, he was aware of differences between Asian “civilizations,” but he believed that they all differed from Western Civilization in principle—in their promotion of peace and beauty. Okakura saw Japan as the “exhibition hall” of all of these Asian civilizations but did not advocate what would become commonplace in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War—that Japan become the leader of an Asian federation because it could harmonize the best of Asian civilization with that of Civilization. Rather he urged the various Asian nations to look within their common traditions to produce an alternative to the aggressive and dominating Civilization of the West (Ueda 1996, 16–18).  

As Hashikawa Bunzō has revealed, Pan-Asianism in Japan contained both of these trends: the solidarity-oriented, non-dominating conception of Japan’s role in reviving Asia, as well as the conception of Japan as, what we might call in short, the harmonizing or synthesizing leader. Pan-Asianism in Japan both fed and resisted the nascent imperialism of that nation (Hashikawa 1980, 331–341). Increasingly after the Russo-Japanese War, however, the view that Japan was the only Asian nation capable of rescuing Asia and harmonizing East and West civilizations began to take hold. This then became the characteristic Japanese response to the aporia of nationalism: to absorb civilization within the confines of the nation and to maintain the separation of civilization so it may continue to perform the authorizing function. Because it “belonged” to Asia, the Japanese nation could bring to modernity the timeless sacrality of Asia, and because it had mastered Western Civilization, it could bring material modernity to Asia. Popular educational journals from the 1910s reveal the production of this sense of belonging: They depicted the peoples of Asia as having close cultural and racial ties with the Japanese but as being without nation-states or a sense of peoplehood. The message was clear: Given the danger of Western colonization, it was imperative for Japan as their leader to bring them into the modern era without destroying their traditions. What is remarkable is how the idea of the closeness or intimacy with Asians—the eternal Asians—in the Japanese imagination was produced so rapidly during the 1910s; indeed, the language of

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8 Born in reaction both to the Western and imperialist character of Civilization, the idea of “Asian” civilization necessarily possessed an anti-imperialist rhetoric of liberation and egalitarianism that was often in tension with the celebration of Asian traditionalism. We see this particularly in the case of Manchukuo.
the Twenty-one Demands made upon the Chinese government in 1915 reflected this narrative (Yamazaki 1994). It was a compelling narrative precisely because it made the familial relationship between Asian peoples appear so natural, and it would compel an entire nation, under the right circumstances, to pursue its destiny in Asia.

Another more aggressive ideology based upon the confrontation of Eastern versus Western civilization appeared in the immediate post–World War I era. Fueled by the American racial exclusions of Chinese and Japanese, this ideology would re-appear during the Pacific War as the theater of an East-West showdown. This tendency was best represented by the thinker Ōkawa Shumei and later by Ishihara Kanji in Manchuria. Ōkawa (1886–1957), an activist, writer, student of Indian philosophy, and translator of the Koran, was significantly influenced by Okakura. Like the latter, Ōkawa saw an underlying unity among the different Asian societies—a spiritual, moral, and timeless essence—which he opposed to Western civilization. Unlike Okakura, however, Ōkawa did not believe in the value of peace and viewed history in Civilizational terms as progress born out of conflict and war, most centrally, war between Asia and the West. The ultimate victory of Asia over the West would be led by Japan’s victory over America which would liberate Asia from the enslavement of Western colonialism, and which was Japan’s moral duty despite the ingratitude of the Asian peoples. But the first task for Ōkawa was to combat the corruption and obstacles that he encountered in the Taishō state. He was implicated in several terrorist incidents, including one in which Prime Minister Inukai was assassinated (Szpilman 1998, 43–47, 50).

That pan-Asian civilizational discourse in Japan had a violent dimension is well known, but the ideology itself cannot be dismissed merely as disguised imperialism. In the immediate aftermath of the war, a group of Japanese Asianists, in alliance with disaffected Korean elites, sought to create their own utopian, anti-Western polity called Koryo (Gaoli) nation (1920) in the Jiandao region between Manchuria and Korea, which had been the heartland of the ancient Koguryo state. The Japanese involved in this enterprise were stalwart Asianists involved in the 1911 Chinese revolution, such as Suenaga Misao of the Genyōsha, and far right political groups like the Black Dragon society of Uchida Ryohei; the event was publicized by the Ōmotokyo, a syncretic religious cult associated with new world religious societies such as the Bahai, the Red Swastika Society, and the Dao Yuan (more below) (Hasegawa 1982, 94). Several circumstances converged to produce this movement. The evacuation of Russian power in northeast Asia following the Soviet revolution allowed the expansion of Japanese power
into the region. The erstwhile yangban—the Confucian elite—were disaffected because of their displacement by Japanese policies. About one million laboring Koreans in the Jiandao region of Manchuria were rendered vulnerable by their stateless condition. Finally, American immigration policies sparked off renewed anti-Western sentiments.

Uchida’s group joined with nativist Korean societies in an alliance named Isshinkai to create this utopian nation and even formulated its constitution (Hasegawa 1982, 95). In this constitution, Confucianism was to be the national religion; property was to be owned collectively; land was to be distributed according to the ancient Chinese well-field system; the system of governance was to be wuwei and its goal datong. Citizenship was to be equal without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or race. Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and Asian Russians would all be equal citizens. If we are to believe the proclamations, the doctrine of equality was of particular significance because the Isshinkai was opposed to the Japanese state policies in Korea and viewed the annexation as an imperialist act which denied the equality of Asian peoples. Thus its ideology contained elements of a return to East Asian traditions which self-consciously embedded an opposition to the modern Western or Westernized state. At the same time it also proclaimed modern notions of republicanism and equality. Indeed, it prefigured some of the theoretically radical ideas that were implemented in the puppet state of Manchukuo (1932–45), such as equality among ethnic groups, following Kyōwakai or Xiehehui. While we cannot but see this movement as an effort to expand Japanese (albeit non-state) power on the mainland, at the same time we also see how the new ideology of civilization with its roots in the utopian egalitarianism of nationalism shaped the movement and its projected political forms. A similar political adventure in Mongolia designed supposedly to usher in a new Asian era from the heartland of Asiatic power was led by the Ōmoto-kyo in 1924. This venture was applauded by the Japanese press as an effort to keep Asia out of Soviet hands (Hasegawa, 100–104).

In China the new civilization discourse and its links to pan-Asianism has been largely neglected or dismissed in the historiography precisely because of its association with Japanese imperialism. During the three decades from 1911 until 1945, however, the discourse of Eastern civilization—whether as superior to Western civilization or as necessary to redeem the latter—actually flourished in China as an intellectual, cultural, and social movement. To what extent the discourse of Eastern civilization could be distinguished from Chinese civilization was both a subject of debate and of ambivalence. The ambivalence mirrored the structural ambiguity, or even aporia, to be found in the
relationship between nationalism and civilization noted above. While the (Chinese) nationalist impulse sought to conflate civilization with the territorial nation, the spiritual impulses sustaining the formulation of civilization tended to seek a universal sphere of application, viewing national boundaries as artificial walls. To some degree, as we shall see, the modern intellectualist construction of civilization tended towards the conflation, whereas the more popular, social movements tended to view civilization more transnationally.

Ishikawa Yoshihiro has persuasively argued that the development of East-West civilizational discourse among Chinese intellectuals during the years 1910–19 was closely connected to that in Japan, even though it would take distinctive shape in China. Through the years 1910–19 and the early 1920s, Japan continued to be the principal lens through which Chinese gained modern knowledge; there was a steady influx of Japanese books and magazines together with continuing growth of translations from the Japanese (Sanető 1940). The new civilizational discourse also entered through the same routes and brought with it the particular assumptions upon which it had been constructed or reconstructed in Japan: the geographical and environmental bases of civilizational differences, the role of linear progressive history, the binary construction, the synthesis formulation, and the redemptive character of Eastern civilization, among others.

One of the more important Japanese influences on Chinese thinkers during World War I was a middlebrow (ya interi) Japanese writer by the name of Kayahara Kazan (1880–1951). He was popular with Chinese intellectuals precisely because his Japanese writing was relatively lucid and simple. Kayahara’s philosophy sought to synthesize the thought of various Western philosophers such as Hegel, Bergson, and Emerson, as well as the geographical determinism of Henry Buckle and Ratzel. Kayahara delineated his own stages of civilization, posited the distinction between the dynamic northern civilizations of the Europeans and the “still,” southern civilizations, and explained these in terms of geography and environment. Like other Taishō intellectuals he too arrived at the necessity of synthesizing the two civilizations (Ishikawa 1994, 398–403).

Kayahara’s impact on Chinese intellectuals was considerable and one Communist Party member even wrote to Mao urging him to fulfill the world historical tasks of Lenin and Kayahara. His most significant impact, perhaps, was upon Li Dazhao, founder of the Communist Party and librarian at Beijing University, who collected a large number of contemporary Japanese magazines that included the writings of Kayahara. This impact was particularly felt by Li’s Spring Youth group which
was centrally concerned with the problem of renewal—the renewal of ancient civilizations such as those of China and India. Although Li was perfectly aware of Japanese expansionist designs embedded in these ideas, Kayahara appears to have influenced his conception of history and his particular mode of synthesizing East and West to create a new civilization in the aftermath of the Great War (Ishikawa 1994, 430). Incidentally, Li Dazhao believed that the Russian revolution also derived its world significance from Russia's intermediate geographical and civilizational location, thus being able to mediate between the East and the West (Ishikawa 1994, 420).

Another important channel for the introduction of civilizational discourse was the popular Chinese journal *Dongfangzazhi* (Eastern Miscellany). Its editor Du Yaquan was a tireless promoter of the idea of the superiority of the still or quiet civilization of the East which was obliged to rescue the world from the restless civilization of the West responsible for the terrible violence of world-wide war. The editorial essays of the journal frequently dwelt on this theme, especially towards the end of the war, and the journal often translated Japanese essays on the problem. In 1919, the *Eastern Miscellany* published a translation of a Japanese article entitled “Chinese Spirit and the European Spirit.” Ishikawa has tracked the chain of writing which led from the writings of an alienated, diasporic Chinese via Europe and Japan back into China. The article discussed two essays translated from the English into German by Gu Hongming, the Malay-born, Britain and German educated, classical Chinese scholar. One of Gu’s essays was titled “Reasons for China’s Opposition to European Concepts” and the Japanese article reported the reception of his essay by a group of disaffected German intellectuals (Ishikawa 1994, 415–416). In China it led to a major debate on the question of Chinese civilization versus Western civilization in which the giants of Chinese intellectual life, including Li Dazhao, Liang Qichao, Liang Shuming, Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, Chen Duxiu, Zhang Dongsun, and others, took a position. Thus, with the publication of this translation in the *Eastern Miscellany*, the idea of the acceptability of Chinese civilization entered China through a complex global loop. This route underscored not only the emergence of a global intellectual sphere, but the necessity of its recognition by the Other in order to be affirmed by the self.

The debate in China was framed in terms of whether Chinese and, more broadly, Eastern traditional civilization could redeem the West. There were, to be sure, various thinkers who took different positions in the debate including, for instance, those like Liang Shuming who believed in the superiority of Chinese civilization, those who favored
a synthesis—such as Li Dazhao and Du Yaquann—though in different ways, and the mainstream of radical intellectuals who rejected the value of Chinese civilization. Nonetheless, the debate underscored certain common assumptions: that the differences between East and West were civilizational differences, and that such differences posited holistic, isolated, and pure civilizations. To be sure, this was assumed even when such thinkers called for the synthesis of the best qualities of the two. Since the ideas of these intellectuals are well known, I shall not dwell on them. By the mid-1920s, however, the discourse begins to appear in cultural, political, and social practices as well (see Grieder 1981; Alitto 1979).9

Perhaps the least studied and the most successful realm in which the idea of an Eastern civilization was constructed was culture. We have a rough idea of how the notion of an essentialized Eastern civilization was constructed by interactions during the 1920s between Chinese intellectuals and a host of Western philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Henri Bergson, Rudolph Eucken, Irving Babbit, and the Indian, Rabindranath Tagore. Emerging research in a wide range of cultural practices reveals that perhaps more significant were the Sino-Japanese exchanges in realms such as the revival or reconstruction of traditional medicine, in the reconstructions of Buddhism and Confucianism, and in the representation of literati and Buddhist art among others as exemplary of Eastern civilization (Wong 1999). As we have observed earlier, these representations were made in reference to Western forms in that their significance developed either in opposition to or in a prefiguration of the latter.

Its political moment in China is associated with the famous lecture by Sun Yat-sen in December 1924 in Kobe, Japan, entitled “Greater Asianism” (“Da Yaxiyazhuyi”). I have discussed this lecture in some detail elsewhere, so I will only note that its significance has often been minimized in the historical scholarship perhaps also because of the later record of Japanese actions in China. Yet Sun seems to have absorbed the Asian civilizational discourse quite deeply and spelt out its key political category of wangdao or the way of the ethical monarchs and peaceful rulership, opposed to the unethical and violent way

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9 The ambivalence regarding the value of Chinese “civilization” continues to dominate Chinese intellectual discourse on the subject. Partly as a result, both the Enlightenment conception as well as the post–Great War conception of civilization continue to inform the Chinese signifier wenming, the translation of ‘civilization’. Thus it is by identifying the context of its use as well as by differentiating the usages of “culture” (wenhua)—as in the German usage of Kultur—that we can grasp which sense of civilization is intended.
of the hegemon (the way of the West). Sun was rhetorically skillful in being able to draw the Japanese into a discourse of solidarity, simultaneously retaining a Chinese centrality by invoking the imperial Chinese tribute system. *Wangdao* was based upon the recognition of the Chinese emperor through the hierarchical system of reciprocities of the tribute system. Thus Sun appealed to the Japanese to renounce the Western methods of *badao* and return to the Asian method of peaceful solidarity. As it turned out, the Japanese military appropriated the language of *wangdao* and used it to rule China instead. The political interest in pan-Asianism in China is also indicated by the convening of two successive Asian People’s conferences: in Nagasaki in 1926, and in Shanghai in 1927. To be sure, these conferences hardly demonstrated much solidarity, because the Chinese and Korean delegates understandably used the forum to argue that the condition for Asian unity must be Japanese renunciation of imperialism (Mizuno 1994).

In any event, Sun’s discourse of civilization developed in two directions which exemplify nationalism’s aporetic relationship to the idea of civilization. On the one hand, the Goumindang (GMD) actively propagated the idea of two civilizations of the East and West by the 1930s. This notion is perhaps best expressed in its New Life movement of the 1930s through which it sought to revitalize material modernity represented by the West by means of an ascetic Confucian spirituality and morality. Chen Lifu, the theorist of the New Life movement made a classical statement of the East-West synthesis. Creatively employing the framework of evolutionism, Chen outlined a parallel material and spiritual evolutionism. Without spiritual progress, the evolution of material civilization would inevitably lead to the enslavement of mankind by things. The role of the New Life movement was to infuse the moral qualities from the essence of Chinese civilization into the evolution of material life. Thus will history be propelled into the civilizational ideal of *datong* or the Great Unity (Chen 1976, 128, 133).

Note, however, that Chen’s civilization is uniquely a Chinese civilization; it represents that aspect of the new doctrine of civilization that becomes tied to the nation-state. But for several reasons, the GMD’s equation of civilization and nationalism could not always work even for its own statist purposes. Sun Yat-sen’s conception of a Pan-Asianism was also centered on Confucian virtues of the “kingly way,” but he saw these ethical and moral goals as fully Asian in opposition to Chen’s conception. This strand of thought in the GMD was picked up by another leading GMD theorist and leader, Dai Jitao, who created an institute and a journal in 1930 by the name of *Xin Yaxiya* to keep alive Sun’s ideas. The publication well expressed the tensions of the
new civilizational discourse in its mission to both counter European materialist and imperialist civilization as well as to create a sufficiently trans-Chinese, Asianist ideology. An important function of this Asianism was to secure the allegiance of the minority populations who occupied the vast hinterland over which the nation-state sought to exercise its sovereignty. Thus, even the Chinese statist conception of civilization could not fully contain the trans-national impulse embedded in the conception.

Part III: Redemptive Societies and Civilizational Discourse

In China the discourse of civilization was not merely an intellectual development but became associated with an astonishingly widespread social movement—a movement whose following exceeded by far the popular base of any modern movements emanating from the May Fourth events. Perhaps even more astonishing is the extent to which this phenomena of what I call “redemptive societies”—determined to save the world from strife, greed, and warfare, and which affected the lives of many millions of followers in the first half of this century—has been ignored by historiography, whether in English, Chinese, or, to a lesser extent, Japanese. Some might argue that this historical neglect is a consequence of the highly varied nature of these societies. They ranged from “morality cultivating” charitable organizations to occasionally violent, secret-society-like entities, making them difficult to analyze within a single category.

However, the neglect is just as likely to be a result of modern nationalist historiography’s repugnance towards social movements that refuse to acknowledge allegiance to the nation-state. Recall the split, or aporia, in the relationship of nationalism to civilization whereby the necessary separation of the nation from civilization (as necessary as the conflation of the two) sanctions divided loyalties. Despite significant variations, these societies were often defiantly universalist. Rejected by Chinese nationalists, they often embraced the civilization-based rhetoric of the Japanese invaders in the 1930s and 1940s. Given this background, the term “collaborationism”—a nationalist pejorative—is hardly adequate to characterize their situation. A study of these groups thus raises buried moral questions which are made more thorny by our own moral assumptions shaped by the nation-state.

Some of the more famous of these societies were the Daodehui (Morality Society), the Dao Yuan (Society of the Way) and its philanthropic wing, the Hongwanzihui (Red Swastika Society), the Tong-
shanshe (Fellowship of Goodness), the Zailijiao (The Teaching of the Abiding Principle), the Shijie Zongjiao Datonghui (Society for the Great Unity of World Religions, first organized in Sichuan in 1915 as the Wushanshe), and the Yiguandao (Way of Pervading Unity), among many others. Our principal knowledge of the spread of these societies comes from Japanese surveys of religious and charitable societies in China conducted in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Japanese researchers and officials of the puppet administrations in north China, these societies claimed to command enormous followings. Thus the Fellowship of Goodness claimed a following of 30 million in 1929 (Suemits 1932, 252), and the Red Swastika Society, a following of 7 to 10 million in 1937 (Takizawa 1937, 67). There are also some notable Chinese works on individual societies, for example, the famous study of the Yiguandao by Prof. Li Shiyu of Shandong University who joined the society on several occasions in order to study them. The few Chinese studies of these societies by modern intellectuals tend to be dismissive, however. Thus Wing Tsit-chang, who regards them as “negative in outlook, utilitarian in purpose, and superstitious in belief” (Chan 1953, 167), cites a figure of merely 30,000 members (not followers) for the Red Swastika Society in 1927 as opposed to Suemits’s figure of 3 million followers in 1932 (Chan, 164; Suemits, 302). Chan, however, does note that the Fellowship of Goodness claimed more than a thousand branches in all parts of China proper and Manchuria in 1923 (Chan, 165).

These societies have to be understood in the complex interplay between the particular historical tradition of their derivation and the contemporary global context of the second decade of the twentieth century. They clearly emerged out of the Chinese historical tradition of sectarianism and syncretism. While some of these societies were closely associated with the sectarian tradition, including the worship of Buddhist and folk deities like the Eternal Mother, they also represented the late imperial syncretic tradition (sanjiaoheyi) that combined the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into a single univer-

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10 Given the paucity of Chinese data on these societies, the best we can do is to interrogate the Japanese records. While we can assume that the Japanese researchers may have wanted to exaggerate the numbers in these groups, there was also a concern for accuracy since these surveys were conducted principally to assess the potential for support and opposition to their rule. The figures cited above refer to the spread of these societies all over China largely before the Japanese occupation. Most of the surveys were marked “secret” or for internal consumption. Note that a similar mystery of exaggerated numbers accompanies the rise of such redemptive societies as the Falungong or the Zhonggong today. Given the climate of suppression and secrecy in which these societies had to operate during both periods, the resemblance is perhaps not accidental.
sal faith. Late imperial syncretism, which urged the extinguishing of worldly desires and engagement in moral action, gained popularity among the Confucian gentry and the Buddhist and Daoist laity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Chow 1994, 21–25). The modern redemptive societies inherited the mission of universalism and moral self-transformation from this syncretism. At the same time, these societies also retained the association of the older syncretic societies with sectarian traditions, popular gods, and practices such as divination, planchette, and spirit writing (Chow, 22–27). In this way they continued to remain organically connected to Chinese popular society. Hence, while it might appear confused to associate these movements with secret societies, it was their connections to popular culture and local concerns that caused several of them to blur with secret societies at their rural edges.

The new global context of the twentieth century significantly transformed the meaning of their project. A number of these societies were formally established or saw their rapid expansion during the period from World War I through the 1920s (MDNJ 1934, 4:1; Takizawa 1937, 67cf.; HZN 1941, 505–507cf.), when, as we have seen, a critical discourse of Western civilization as being overly materialist and violent began to emerge globally. These societies sought to supplement and correct the material civilization of the West with the spiritual civilization of the East. The resultant synthesis they envisaged took the shape of a religious universalism that included not only Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, but also Islam and Christianity. Several of these societies claimed to represent the essential truth of the five world religions and by spreading this truth, to bring an end to religious partisanship and achieve world peace and personal salvation.

Not only did these societies adapt their cosmology to the new geographical conception of the universe (to include Christianity and Islam), but some of them also adapted to the temporal vision of a progressive history. The Morality Society which was established in 1918 declared that it sought to synthesize the scientific view of the world with the religious and moral visions of Asian thought (MDNJ, 1:3–6). The society of which Kang Youwei was president until his death in 1927 argued that without moral and spiritual regeneration, human evolution (jinhua) would stall and turn even more destructive because of the present trend towards hedonistic materialism (MDNJ, 4:1; Takizawa, 67). Even the Yiguandao, perhaps the least “modern” or “this-worldly” of these societies, added the truths of Christianity and Islam to its earlier synthesis and cross-referenced its own esoteric temporal scheme with the modern chronology of dynastic and republican history (Li Shiyu 1948, 50–55).
Their modern orientation is also revealed by their engagement in contemporary projects. Organized with charters and by-laws, armed with a strong this-worldly orientation and a rhetoric of worldly redemption, these societies resembled other modern religious and morality societies all over the world. The New Religion to Save the World (Jiu-shi Xinjiao) sought to save the world not only through philanthropic institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, and refugee centers (HZN 1941, 485–486), but also through dissemination and publicity (schools, newspapers, libraries, lectures), through charitable enterprises such as factories and farms employing the poor, savings and loan associations, and even by engineering projects such as road and bridge repair (HZN, 491–493). As for the “red swastika” of the society with that name, while this can, of course, be understood in Buddhist terms, it was also modeled upon an Eastern equivalent of the Red Cross Society. The Red Swastika society not only pursued traditional and modern charities, they also included international activities, such as contributions to relief efforts and the establishment of professorships of Esperanto in Paris, London, and Tokyo (Suemitsu 1932, 292–305, 354). The Zailijiao, which emerged in the very late Qing period and had established twenty-eight centers in Beijing and Tianjin in 1913 (HZN, 507–527), appears to have had forty-eight centers in Tianjin alone by the late 1920s. It was a strict disciplinarian movement and developed drug rehabilitation centers using herbal medicines and self-cultivation techniques (zhengshen) which were said to fully cure over 200 opium addicts a year (Suemitsu 262–263).

This outer or worldly dimension was matched by a strong inner dimension relating to moral and religious cultivation of the individual spirit and body. The relationship between the inner and outer dimensions is summed up by an interview between a leader of the Daoyuan (the parent of the Red Swastika Society, with close ties to the Ōmokyo) and Japanese surveyor Suemitsu sometime before 1930 (308–309):

Q: What is the Daoyuan about?

A: To simultaneously cultivate the inner and outer; the inner through meditation and the outer through philanthropy.

Q: What is the dao of Daoyuan?

A: It is the source of all things (wanyou genyuan). It is not a single religion; it has the power to clarify the good. . . . Actually the dao has no name, but we in the human world have to give it a name to show our reverence. So we revere the founders of the five religions. . . . We also respect nature, morality, and cultivate the self through charity.
The cognitive map of these societies traced a path directly from the individual to the universal. Self-cultivation (ziji xiuyang, xiushen) ranged from practicing charity, to cultivating the habit of close moral and spiritual introspection, to the exercise of a strict disciplinary regimen. The disciplinary regimen in some societies emphasized strict vows of abstinence from drugs, meat, and alcohol, and sometimes the quasi-renunciation of the family, and in others, detailed codes of moral behavior and bodily comportment (Suemitsu 1932, 266, 326–328; Takizawa 1937, 76–78; Chan 1953, 164–167). Most societies combined all three. In the characteristic reciprocal movement from the self to the universal, these societies frequently defied political boundaries. For instance, the Yiguandao’s construction of the genealogical transmission of the “way” (daotong) begins with the Chinese sage kings, Yao and Shun, and follows the orthodox Confucian line until Mencius. Thereafter, the Confucian orthodoxy loses the way and the mantle is carried forth by Buddhists and Daoists. In its genealogical record of masters who continued to transmit the way, Buddhist teachers from all over India and Central Asia are cited together with the classical Chinese place names of their provenance (Li 1948, 51–55). The Yiguandao genealogy reveals how the geobody of the nation was quite irrelevant to its principally spiritual mission.

It is in significant part for this reason that the GMD, the nationalist rulers of China from 1927 until 1949, sought to prohibit all such societies almost since it first came to power (Ōtani 1937, 69, 123; Suemitsu 1932, 251, 255). We have seen through Chen Lifu’s nationalist conception of civilization outlined earlier, how a nationalist regime might want to outlaw and persecute many of these societies including elitist ones like the Morality Society and the Tongshanshe, which tended to be apolitical, upper-class, gentry-merchant yangxiu (moral cultivation and philanthropic) societies (Suemitsu, 251). While their defiance of territorial allegiance was a major underlying reason behind their interdiction, however, the national question was played out in a complex way. The GMD frequently condemned these societies as driven by superstitions and dominated by local bullies and warlords. Behind this rhetoric, though, lay a strategic representation of modern religion and national tradition. In this strategy, the GMD produced a realm of legitimate spiritualism into which it incorporated modern, licensed religions and designated them as part of China’s national civilization. At the same time, many popular religious traditions were condemned as superstition and banned (Duara 1995, ch. 3). As we have seen, many of the religious practices of these redemptive societies were, in fact, drawn from popular culture. But the regime was also threatened
by the historical, subversive power of these societies deriving from their transcendent vision. The transnational spiritualism of these redemptive societies not only transgressed the GMD’s definition of the modern, but its definition of the national boundaries of spiritual civilization. Certainly the cultural bonds of these societies to similar Japanese societies such as the Ōmotokyo made them susceptible to these attacks.

Before going on to examine their role in the Japanese invasion, we need to clarify further the civilizational character of these societies. Many of these societies, particularly those closely associated with rural or popular culture, saw themselves as restoring or redeeming lost civilizational values as opposed to advocating Eastern civilization against, or to supplement, Western civilization. Thus, they represented an older Chinese understanding of civilization as “civilizing process”—of bringing true and proper civilizational virtues to all, rather than self-consciously representing the civilization of the East or East Asia. This was especially the case among the more popular societies which David Ownby has identified as representing a kind of a “fundamentalism,” as movements that were “both against and from within the mainstream.” For example, there were movements which condemned the Buddhist church “for having abandoned its own mission of self-abnegation and transcendence” (Ownby 1999, 1528). Ownby’s recent study of the apocalyptic Way of the Temple of the Heavenly Immortals exemplifies how these societies mediated deeply orthodox or “fundamental” values from Confucianism or Daoism with popular cultural traditions to reconstruct community along traditional, even utopian prescriptions (Ownby 2000, 15–20). These societies are civilizational in the sense used by Robert Redfield: not only do they mediate between great and little traditions, they are a means “for communication between components that are universal, reflexive, and indoctrinating, and components which are local, unreflective, and accepting” (Redfield 1962–63, 394).

To be sure, the idea of representing the East was by no means absent among the more upper-class or modernized syncretic societies. As noted above, the Red Swastika Society or the Morality Society had well-developed ideas of moral cultivation and public activity which they saw as part of the Eastern civilizational project of redeeming the world. But a great number of the followers of these syncretic, redemptive societies appear to have been centrally focused on their transcendent vision, and it is perhaps fair to say that at least through the 1920s, their emphasis on saving humanity tended to be stronger than the East-West binary. While the advocates of Eastern civilization certainly also declared their scope to be universal, significantly, they found it necessary to stress the Eastern origins, and hence the distinct authority, of this
civilization. This distinction between scope and origins overlaps the
nineteenth-century ambiguity noted above between civilization as uni-
versal or universalizing and exclusive or national, between process and
achieved fact. While the claim to the authority of, and for, the East,
made civilization attractive to nationalisms (of the East), it was sig-
ificantly absent or underplayed in the redemptive societies. Japanese
imperialists sought precisely to appropriate their universalism and con-
vert it into a more exclusive ideology of Eastern civilization.

The Japanese invasion of northeast and north China in the 1930s
produced a breakdown in the formal structures of control and author-
ity, whether of the GMD or the warlords. Secret societies, sectarians,
and even redemptive societies were able to enlarge their influence in
this vacuum. Indeed, in some cases, the Chinese communists and Jap-
anese forces often competed for their allegiance (Mitani 1998, 104).
Unlike the GMD, which had earlier driven most groups belonging to
all three types of societies underground, the Japanese military sought
particularly to bring the redemptive societies under their wing. Indeed,
researchers like Suemitsu (1932, 208–209) and Ōtani believed that by
forcing them underground, the GMD had actually increased the asso-
ciation of these societies with the violent secret societies and made
them politically unreliable. As organizations which promoted a civi-
lizational ideal, these redemptive societies, as well as selected secret
societies that valued traditional Confucian ideals like zhong and yi,
were attractive to the Japanese imperialists from the early 1930s, when
they developed the ideology of pan-Asianism and Eastern civilizational
values versus Western materialism.

Similar “redemptive” societies in Japan, such as the Shibunkai,
ofering Confucianism and Shinto as the spiritual alternative to exces-
sive materialism and individualism, had begun to grow in strength from
the 1920s, particularly as economic conditions worsened and social
unrest grew. Asiatic moral systems emphasizing ethical responsibilities
were celebrated as alternatives to capitalism and Marxism, both West-
ern doctrines (Smith 1959, 123–126). In the 1930s, the redemptive
rhetoric of elite Confucian societies and the right-wing nationalists
and militarists not only began to come together but were also assimil-
ated in an active political and educational program by the Japanese
government. But the most systematic and sustained effort to formulate
a redemptive pan-Asianism was undertaken by the young officers and
intellectuals in the Kwantung Army in Manchukuo and north China.
By the 1930s, the Manchukuo state, the real power behind which was
the Japanese military, inherited an ideology and language with which
to forge an alliance with the redemptive societies in northeast China.
Like the GMD government in Nanjing, the Manchukuo government
censured the “superstitious” character of the redemptive societies, but instead of seeking to eradicate the societies themselves, it saw in them the potential for their transformation into state-controlled civic organizations (Takizawa 1937, 82–86, 100–102). In this new political framework, many of these societies became, under close supervision of the Manchukuo government, jiaohua (kyōka in Japanese) organizations—agencies engaged in welfare and enlightenment of the people (Gluck 1985, 103; Garon 1993).

The occupying Japanese forces followed the same policies in north China after the invasion in 1937. Occupation era governments in North China at the county and city levels conducted investigations of religious societies in order both to identify opposition and to bring out and encourage the registration of sectarian and redemptive societies precisely as “jiaohua” organizations. Records reveal the registration of, or petitions to register, a very large number of these societies between 1937 and 1945 with either the Department of Police, the Department of Social Affairs, or the Department of Rites. In some places, these societies registered with the quasi-official “Revive Asia Association” (Xingyayuan) or the “New Peoples Society” (Xinminhui). The total figure for participants or followers of all societies within a single county or city often reached beyond tens of thousands. The records frequently reveal the dates of the formal establishment of the religious society. In one survey of several counties in Shanxi, of twenty-seven societies registered, only one was founded after 1941, twelve were founded after 1931, and the rest predated the Japanese invasion. These were typically syncretic or Buddhistic societies that sought to uphold traditional Eastern morality, to salvage society, and more and more, to resist Communism and uphold the East Asian new order. Many have the names we have encountered above, but there were also several Buddhist societies and some purely local ones. Of the societies that were registered only after 1937, it is difficult to know how many may have been created just to seize opportunities under an occupying regime due to the fact that the evidence is only of their registration as public bodies and not of their founding (WWD).

Can we bring the charge of collaborationism on these societies? For the first time in their history, the redemptive societies were permitted to pursue their trans-territorial, redemptive goals without fear of suppression and incarceration. For them it was a matter of pursuing their non-national or even anti-national goals, and the Manchukuo regime—ruthless in so many respects—was ostensibly more tolerant, even welcoming, of them than the other regimes. As societies with civilizational or religious ideals, the issue of a national government may have been less important to them than the ability to pursue their vision.
Thus, for instance, the Way of the Temple studied by Ownby, like many others (see note 11 below), cooperated with the Japanese, but battled the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), presumably because the latter opposed their transcendent vision. Nationalism and modern ideas of society were seen by them as restrictive and repressive of their activities; in this sense, the Japanese military-sponsored ideas of “clash of civilization” often made sense to them even if they did not earlier see themselves self-consciously as representing a civilization in conflict.

At the same time, however, it is also abundantly clear that their trans-territorial or transcendent goals were just as clearly appropriated and subverted by the Japanese puppet state, no matter what its rhetoric. But this raises a different set of issues. How far can we hold a people responsible for the state’s manipulation of their ideals? Does this responsibility authorize our dismissal or condemnation of the varied, and even mixed, motives of people—like people everywhere—who pursue their goals and ideals as they might in any society? Several society leaders believed that an East Asian regime committed to their vision of civilization was preferable to a national regime hostile to their goals. Indeed, when it was possible, the redemptive societies cooperated with the Japanese only to the extent to which they saw them furthering their goals. In the rural and peripheral areas, wherever the societies saw the Japanese-backed regime as inimical to their ideals and goals—whether towards their transcendent vision or towards their conception of ideal community—the opposition to the regime was quite sustained (Ōtani 1937, 27–32, 38, 46, 58–60, 97, 104–108; Taki-zawa 1937, 89–92, 95). These societies had no need for a state which did not further their goals.11

The new discourse of civilization, however derivative from the old, carried with it a redemptive and egalitarian utopianism. The thrust of my essay has shown that this potential was repeatedly lost in the twentieth century as the expansionist and exclusive tendencies of nationalism tended to transform civilization from a process of the Self’s desire to be desired by the Other through the latter’s emulation of the “civilized” Self, to a mark, however defensive, of superiority and distinctiveness. Elias emphasized the utter nationalization of the idea of civilization among the French and Germans on the eve of the second World War. Recent scholarship on civilization, such as the writings of Huntington, has tended not to see the tension between the two, but

11 Details about these societies in Manchukuo can be found in my forthcoming work, *Manchukuo and the Frontiers of the East Asian Modern*.
rather, taken their conflation for granted. And yet we must recognize that the ideological relations between nationalism and civilization require some separation of the two. There are many social groups and forces or tendencies which espouse civilizational ideals in the world. Most dramatically, the recent appearance—or rather, visibility—of the Falungong and related movements in China testifies to the persistent search for transcendence.12 It is not the business of historians to support or oppose such groups, but by acknowledging and sustaining the relative autonomy of civilization, we may hold nationalism to a higher standard than it has been in the past.

References


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12 The Falungong and many other qigong-based movements appeared initially after June 1989, when the Communist state praised traditional Chinese civilization in order to discourage Western influences. The Falungong is strongly reminiscent of the redemptive societies in its syncretism and its message of universal redemption. Its technology of self-discipline—expressed in a form of qigong—also parallels the empowering pathway between the self and cosmic forces that we have observed in the redemptive societies. Finally, the state’s fierce opposition to them as well as their rather disciplined and principled defiance of state proscriptions, suggest, to some extent at least, a continuing pattern from the first half of the last century (Falundafa 2000; Benoit 1999; Micollier 1999).


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