Research Article

Modernization and Cultural Identity in Contemporary China

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Abstract: Over the past four decades, China has undergone a rapid and comprehensive modernization process, transforming the country's economic, social, and cultural structures. This transformation reflects not only economic growth and technological innovation but also tensions between tradition and modernity in cultural identity. This study highlights how modernization shapes the cultural identities of China's urban youth through a qualitative approach, combining digital discourse analysis and in-depth interviews. Furthermore, it examines China's civilizational diplomacy as a global strategy that combines cultural hegemony, soft power, and epistemic challenges to the Western order. Using the A-DUNK framework, the study identifies three main findings: first, civilizational diplomacy displays a duality between inclusive dialogue and the centrality of Cynical morality; second, China's soft power is built through moral legitimacy that emphasizes historical continuity and civilizing values; and third, this diplomacy presents epistemic challenges that emphasize relationality and coexistence among civilizations. The discussion shows that China's approach aligns with civilizational pluralism, yet still faces tensions between inclusive rhetoric and asymmetrical practices. Normatively, the success of China's civilizational diplomacy hinges on its ability to institutionalize ethical reciprocity, transforming moral discourse into an inclusive procedural mechanism. This study contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of Chinese modernization and diplomacy as phenomena that are not only geopolitical but also normative and epistemic, offering a model of "civilizational relationalism" that emphasizes the co-construction of meaning, legitimacy, and world order in the era of post-Western globalization. These findings open up opportunities for further research on cross-cultural reception, comparisons with other emerging powers, and the long-term evolution of civilizational diplomacy narratives.

Keywords: China Modernization, Civilizational Diplomacy, Cultural Identity, Epistemic Challenges, Soft Power.

1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, China has undergone one of the most rapid and far-reaching modernization processes in human history. Since the economic reforms initiated in 1978, the country has transitioned from an agrarian economy to a global industrial powerhouse and digital innovator [1]. This transformation has fundamentally altered the nation's social structure, modes of production, and everyday life. Yet beyond these material changes lies a deeper and more complex question: how modernization reshapes cultural identity within Chinese society. Understanding this question is vital not only for China studies but also for broader debates in the humanities concerning identity, globalization, and modernity [2].

Modernization in China is often portrayed through the lens of economic growth and technological progress. However, this narrow focus tends to obscure the sociocultural dimensions that accompany such development. Cultural identity, long rooted in Confucian moral philosophy and collective values, now interacts with global capitalist logics and digital connectivity [3]. The coexistence of these forces generates tension between tradition and innovation, continuity and change. This study contends that these tensions are not merely transitional but constitutive of China's evolving cultural landscape [4] [5].

Existing scholarship has addressed aspects of China's modernization from political, economic, and institutional perspectives. Studies in sociology and political economy have documented the structural reforms driving China's rise, while communication and media studies have explored the state's cultural policies and soft-power strategies. Nevertheless, comparatively fewer works examine how modernization is lived, perceived, and negotiated at the level of individual and collective identity, particularly among younger generations in urban China who are at the forefront of these transformations. This constitutes a crucial gap in the current literature [6] [7].

2. Literature Review

Research on cultural identity in China often falls into two contrasting paradigms. One argues that modernization and globalization have led to the erosion of traditional values and the homogenization of Chinese culture [8]. The other asserts that China's modernization is a unique, indigenized process that strengthens cultural continuity through state-led revivalism. Both perspectives, however, tend to overlook the lived hybridity that emerges from the everyday practices of young Chinese navigating between these poles. Few studies have systematically analyzed this ambivalent negotiation from the standpoint of ordinary citizens [9] [10].

Furthermore, while Western modernization theory assumes a linear progression toward a universal model of modernity, post-colonial and cultural studies challenge this assumption by emphasizing the multiplicity of modernities. In the case of China, this means that modernization cannot be understood simply as Westernization, but rather as a process of hybridization; an active rearticulation of identity that blends global modernity with indigenous heritage [11] [12]. Despite the theoretical recognition of "multiple modernities," empirical research examining how this manifest in the Chinese context remains limited.

The rise of digital technologies further complicates this landscape. Social media platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Bilibili have become powerful arenas where cultural symbols are circulated, contested, and redefined [13]. Young Chinese users engage in creative practices that mix traditional aesthetics with contemporary expressions, such as the resurgence of Hanfu clothing or the reinterpretation of classical poetry in digital formats. Yet academic attention to these cultural negotiations within online spaces remains scattered and often descriptive rather than analytical. A deeper qualitative inquiry is necessary to capture how digital modernity mediates identity construction in China [14] [15].

At the same time, state narratives play a significant role in shaping collective identity. The official discourse of the "Chinese Dream" and the concept of "cultural confidence" seeks to reconcile modernization with nationalism by asserting that Chinese values can coexist with global progress. However, these top-down narratives may not fully align with the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways individuals experience modernization in their everyday lives. The gap between policy rhetoric and lived reality offers fertile ground for critical inquiry into how national identity is produced, internalized, and contested [16] [17].

Another underexplored dimension is the generational divide. The post-1990s and post-2000s cohorts have grown up during a period of prosperity, urbanization, and hyper-connectivity, unlike previous generations that experienced scarcity and collective ideology. Their worldview is inherently transnational, mediated by digital culture, and shaped by exposure to global consumerism. Yet they

remain embedded in a social milieu that valorizes tradition and collective belonging. Understanding how these younger generations reconcile individualism and collectivism provides new insights into the cultural psychology of modernization [18] [19].

Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how modernization in China reconfigures cultural identity among urban youth. It adopts a qualitative approach, combining discourse analysis of digital media with interviews to capture subjective experiences of cultural negotiation. Rather than framing modernization as either cultural loss or revival, the study conceptualizes it as a dynamic process of hybridization, where global and local, tradition and modernity, are continuously intertwined. This approach responds to the need for empirical grounding in theories of multiple modernities and contributes to the re-centering of non-Western experiences in global debates on identity formation [20].

Ultimately, this research aims to advance an interdisciplinary understanding of China's modernization as both a sociocultural and an economic process. By situating individual experiences within broader theoretical and political frameworks, it bridges micro-level identity construction with macro-level modernization discourse. The findings are expected to enrich discussions in cultural studies, sociology, and digital humanities, demonstrating that China's path to modernity represents not a rupture with its past but a continuous negotiation of meanings in an age of global interdependence.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how China's civilizational diplomacy shapes global moral and epistemic orders. It applies the A-DUNK framework, Analytical, Descriptive, Understanding, Normative, and Knowledge-building, to integrate insights from social sciences, humanities, and policy analysis. In the analytical stage, China's diplomacy is deconstructed into identity construction, moral legitimacy, and epistemic positioning. Data are collected from official policy documents, including the Global Civilization Initiative, White Papers on Peaceful Development, speeches by Chinese leaders, and reports from international forums such as BRICS and the Boao Forum for Asia.

In the descriptive stage, China's cultural diplomacy initiatives from 2013 to 2025, including Confucius Institutes, media outreach, and Belt and Road cultural projects, are systematically mapped. The understanding stage employs critical discourse analysis and hermeneutic interpretation to uncover the philosophical and cultural assumptions underlying diplomatic narratives. The normative stage evaluates ethical implications, assessing whether China's diplomacy fosters genuine pluralism or reinforces hierarchical moral authority. Finally, the knowledge-building stage synthesizes findings into a conceptual model of civilizational relationalism, highlighting the interaction between state narratives and global engagement.

This methodology aligns with the research objectives by enabling a nuanced analysis of both macro-level policies and micro-level practices, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding China's post-Western approach to global diplomacy.

4. Finding and Discussion
4.1. Finding
4.1.1. Cultural Hegemony or Civilizational Dialogue

The empirical evidence drawn from China's diplomatic narratives between 2013 and 2025 reveals a strategic tension between civilizational dialogue and cultural hegemony. Official speeches and policy statements often present the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) as an inclusive platform advocating mutual learning and coexistence among civilizations. Yet, closer discourse analysis indicates that such inclusivity is frequently framed within China's own epistemological vocabulary, suggesting a subtle re-centering of global moral authority around the Chinese cultural ethos.

This duality between openness and centrality emerges as a defining characteristic of China's civilizational diplomacy. On one hand, it challenges the Western modernist monopoly on universal values; on the other, it constructs an alternative universality anchored in Confucian harmony. The A-DUNK analytical phase identifies this as a soft hegemony paradox: China's rejection of Western universalism simultaneously becomes an act of constructing its own.

Field data from multilateral events such as the Boao Forum for Asia and BRICS Summits support this observation. These platforms increasingly deploy civilizational language that positions China not merely as an economic power, but as a normative leader advocating a "shared future for humankind." Such framing echoes the Confucian notion of tianxia, implying a moral hierarchy in which harmony is achieved through cultural deference rather than political equality.

From a descriptive standpoint, civilizational dialogue is operationalized through institutions such as Confucius Institutes, media diplomacy, and scholarship exchanges. However, these mechanisms often maintain asymmetrical flows of knowledge and representation, privileging the dissemination of Chinese perspectives over reciprocal engagement.

The understanding phase of the A-DUNK approach reveals how Chinese intellectual elites reinterpret classical philosophy to align with contemporary geopolitical ambitions. Concepts such as ren (benevolence) and he (harmony) are re-politicized to legitimize China's moral leadership. In doing so, civilizational discourse becomes both a cultural strategy and a foreign policy instrument.

Normatively, the claim of moral leadership raises questions about pluralism. Can civilizational diplomacy sustain a genuine dialogue if it presupposes a moral hierarchy? Critical theorists argue that the very structure of "civilizational harmony" may conceal a monologic power relation.

The knowledge-building synthesis suggests that China's civilizational diplomacy, while rhetorically dialogic, operates within a centripetal logic of value aggregation. Instead of promoting mutual transformation, it often seeks symbolic assimilation under a Sinocentric moral order.

Nonetheless, this model has attracted support among Global South nations that perceive Western liberalism as culturally intrusive. For them, China's discourse represents a form of cultural sovereignty, restoring dignity through civilizational diversity. The discussion thus identifies the first major finding: China's civilizational diplomacy redefines global dialogue not by erasing difference, but by absorbing it within a moral-cultural hierarchy, a nuanced synthesis of hegemony and harmony.

4.1.2. Soft Power and Moral Legitimacy

The second thematic cluster explores how China translates civilizational ideals into instruments of soft power. Through large-scale projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China integrates infrastructure, media narratives, and cultural diplomacy under the rubric of "mutual benefit."

Analytical mapping within the A-DUNK framework indicates that the moral vocabulary of benevolence and shared destiny functions as a legitimizing discourse for geopolitical expansion. By aligning economic connectivity with civilizational virtue, China constructs what can be called moral geopolitics. This strategy contrasts with Western soft power, which often derives legitimacy from liberal democracy and human rights. China's approach rests on historical continuity and moral credibility rather than ideological universalism.

However, descriptive data show that such moral legitimacy remains contested. In regions like Southeast Asia and Africa, China's cultural diplomacy is met with ambivalence: it is welcomed as a non-colonial partnership yet criticized for fostering dependency through debt diplomacy. The understanding dimension interprets this ambivalence as a crisis of moral translation. While Chinese discourse emphasizes virtue (de), partner nations interpret these gestures through pragmatic or transactional lenses. This misalignment weakens China's claim to universal benevolence.

The normative assessment highlights that moral legitimacy cannot be achieved solely through cultural rhetoric; it requires procedural fairness and transparency in cooperation. Without these, civilizational diplomacy risks being perceived as an ethical façade for strategic interest. Yet, the A-DUNK synthesis also reveals that China's emphasis on moral language may signal a deeper ontological shift in global politics, from power as domination to power as moral persuasion. This redefinition, even if imperfect, disrupts the Western monopoly on ethical legitimacy.

The broader implication is that soft power, when reframed through civilizational ethics, becomes a contest over moral authority rather than cultural attraction. China's experiment thus represents both an innovation and a contradiction within the contemporary global order. The second major finding, therefore, is that China's soft power strategy seeks legitimacy not through liberal values, but through moral performativity rooted in civilizational ethics, challenging the normative foundations of Western hegemony.

4.1.3. China's Epistemic Challenge to the Western Order

The final subtheme concerns the epistemic dimension of China's global engagement. Beyond power and morality, civilizational diplomacy challenges the very knowledge structures underpinning modern international relations. The analytical phase reveals how China's foreign policy white papers and academic institutions increasingly employ civilizational epistemology, an approach that privileges relationality, harmony, and historical continuity over Western dualisms of state versus system. Descriptively, this epistemic reconfiguration is evident in the proliferation of concepts such as

"community of shared future," "civilizational confidence," and "global harmony." These terms signal an intentional departure from the ontology of competition toward a discourse of coexistence.

However, the understanding phase highlights a paradox: while China critiques Western epistemology as imperial, it often reproduces its hierarchical logic by assuming a moral vantage point from which to reinterpret the world.

Normatively, this tension raises the question of intellectual pluralism in global theory. Can civilizational diplomacy foster a multiplicity of epistemes, or does it substitute one universalism for another?

The A-DUNK analysis situates this within the broader debate of decolonial knowledge. China's project can be read as a Sinic version of epistemic decolonization, seeking to provincialize the West but without dismantling the notion of civilizational hierarchy itself. Empirical evidence from Chinese think tanks and international forums suggests that this epistemic shift is already influencing regional academic agendas, leading to a "civilizational turn" in Asian IR scholarship.

The knowledge-building synthesis indicates that China's epistemic challenge compels a paradigmatic transformation from international relations as competition to global relations as co-civilizational dialogue. Thus, the third finding asserts that China's diplomacy represents not only a political project but also an epistemic revolution, reshaping how the world conceptualizes order, legitimacy, and coexistence.

4.2. Discussion
4.2.1. Reconstructing Global Order through Civilizational Pluralism
The findings collectively reveal that China's civilizational diplomacy operates as a hybrid discourse that combines moral persuasion, strategic pragmatism, and epistemic ambition. Within the A-DUNK framework, this hybridity is not a weakness but a methodological key: analytically, it exposes the multi-layered structure of China's global projection; normatively, it challenges the Western monopoly on what counts as "universal." From this perspective, China's approach does not seek to overturn the existing order through confrontation, but to reconstruct its moral grammar through the language of civilization. This signals a paradigmatic shift from state-centric competition to civilizational negotiation, a move that carries both integrative and hegemonic potential.

Yet, the promise of civilizational pluralism remains conditional. China's discourse emphasizes inclusivity, but its operational logic, particularly in the Belt and Road and Global Civilization Initiatives, often reproduces hierarchies of dependence and symbolic centrality. The discussion therefore recognizes a dialectical tension between the ideal of coexistence and the practice of asymmetry. In this regard, civilizational diplomacy may not yet achieve pluralism in substance, even if it articulates it in form.

A central theme emerging from the study concerns the ethical paradox of China's moral leadership. The descriptive layer shows that China grounds its legitimacy in moral performance, invoking harmony, benevolence, and shared destiny rather than ideological doctrine. However, this moral language becomes problematic when translated into policy action, as it risks conflating virtue with authority. The A-DUNK understanding phase suggests that China's invocation of Confucian values functions as both a cultural resource and a political instrument.

This dual role raises an unresolved ethical question: can moral authority coexist with strategic interest without collapsing into paternalism? The discussion argues that a sustainable form of civilizational diplomacy would require ethical reciprocity, not moral hierarchy. That is, rather than positioning itself as the teacher of harmony, China must also become a listener in the pluralistic dialogue it seeks to lead. Without such reflexivity, civilizational diplomacy risks reproducing the same asymmetries it aims to overcome.

4.2.2. The Epistemic Turn in Global Politics
The study also points to an emerging epistemic turn in world politics, driven by China's attempt to redefine knowledge itself. The A-DUNK methodology enables a multi-stage reading of this process: analytically, it uncovers the language of epistemic sovereignty; descriptively, it tracks how this discourse permeates academia and policy; normatively, it questions its universality.

China's epistemic project, seen in the "community of shared future" narrative, represents an attempt to provincialize Western knowledge systems while elevating Confucian relational thought as a global epistemology. Yet, as the discussion notes, this move may inadvertently replace one form of universality with another. True epistemic pluralism would require an intercivilizational dialogue in which no single

civilization claims interpretive supremacy.

The discussion therefore extends the findings toward a theoretical proposition: global order reconstruction must evolve from unipolar power to multipolar knowledge. The moral legitimacy of future diplomacy will rest less on who commands resources and more on who can foster genuine epistemic cooperation across civilizational boundaries.

Interpreting China's diplomacy through the A-DUNK lens enables a new theoretical vocabulary, which this paper terms civilizational relationalism. Unlike realism, which interprets international relations as competition for power, civilizational relationalism views global politics as an evolving moral ecosystem in which civilizations interact through shared symbolic resources. This model recognizes the co-constitutive role of ethics, identity, and culture in shaping world order.

However, the discussion cautions that relationalism is not inherently emancipatory. Without institutional guarantees of mutuality, relational rhetoric can become a cover for dependency or soft domination. The challenge, therefore, is to translate relational ethics into procedural mechanisms— dialogue forums, multilateral councils, and epistemic exchanges—that embody the very pluralism China rhetorically defends.

4.2.3. Toward a Post-Western Cosmopolitanism

Finally, the findings suggest that China's civilizational diplomacy may be gesturing toward a post-Western cosmopolitanism, a vision of world order not anchored in liberal rationalism but in moral pluralism. This cosmopolitanism, if realized, could broaden the ethical base of globalization by integrating non-Western moral vocabularies into global governance. However, the discussion underscores that such a transformation demands reciprocal recognition, where each civilization contributes to and is shaped by the collective moral order.

The A-DUNK synthesis, in this light, does not simply describe China's rise; it offers a methodological lens for understanding how civilizations construct meaning, legitimacy, and order in an interconnected world. Thus, the discussion concludes that China's civilizational diplomacy should be read not merely as a geopolitical phenomenon, but as a normative experiment in global moral imagination, one that may yet redefine the boundaries of cosmopolitan thought.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that China's civilizational diplomacy represents not merely a cultural extension of its foreign policy, but a systemic reconfiguration of the moral and epistemic foundations of world order. Through the A-DUNK methodology, integrating analytical, descriptive, understanding, normative, and knowledge-building stages, the research reveals that China's approach operates at the intersection of identity construction, soft power articulation, and epistemic reconstruction. Theoretically, it advances a model of civilizational relationalism that transcends Western state-centric paradigms, positioning civilization as both the subject and substance of international interaction. In this sense, China's diplomacy is not anti-Western, but post-Western, seeking to pluralize rather than abolish the global normative framework.

Empirical findings indicate that China's civilizational discourse, while advocating mutual learning and harmony, often manifests as a controlled dialogue structured around Sinocentric moral authority. Initiatives such as the Global Civilization Initiative and Belt and Road cultural diplomacy demonstrate how soft power is embedded in moral symbolism and historical continuity. This blending of ethics and strategy has allowed China to construct legitimacy in regions historically marginalized by Western liberal hegemony. Yet, the findings also expose persistent asymmetries: moral rhetoric is not always matched by reciprocal engagement, and the universalism of Confucian ethics can inadvertently mirror the exclusivity it seeks to replace. The empirical evidence therefore underscores both the innovative and ambivalent nature of China's civilizational diplomacy.

Normatively, the research argues that the success of China's civilizational diplomacy will depend on its ability to institutionalize ethical reciprocity, transforming moral rhetoric into procedural inclusivity. Policymakers should develop multilateral platforms that embody the dialogical ethos of civilization rather than reproduce hierarchical moralism. This includes fostering intercivilizational academic collaborations, reciprocal media frameworks, and pluralistic governance mechanisms that allow multiple epistemic traditions to coexist. For the global community, the policy implication is clear: a just and sustainable world order cannot emerge from domination, whether Western or Eastern, but from a mutually constructed moral conversation among civilizations. Thus, China's rise offers both a challenge and an invitation: to imagine globalization not as convergence under one model, but as

coexistence through many worlds of meaning.

Future research could explore the reception of China's civilizational diplomacy in different regions to assess cross-cultural interpretations and effectiveness. Comparative studies between China and other emerging powers may reveal alternative models of civilizational engagement in global politics. Longitudinal research could track how these diplomatic narratives evolve over time and their impact on international norms. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining political science, cultural studies, and international relations can deepen understanding of the ethical and epistemic dimensions of global diplomacy.

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