

CONSTRUING "THE PUBLIC" IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE *WENMING* DISCOURSE

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This chapter sheds new light on the analysis of the concept of "civilization" (*wenming*) in the People's Republic of China. The author employs the empirical data that he collected in Nanjing, that is, hundreds of photographs and descriptions of billboards, banners, audiovisual clips, posters, textbooks, and pamphlets on public manners and civic behavior, to create a four-layered classification of the political *wenming* discourse. He then analyzes each category individually delving into their theoretical context to conclude that *wenming*, as a cohesive ideology, serves to construct an absolute, free from circles of familiarity and social positionality, notion of the public good.

Keywords: China, *wenming*, civilization, political discourse, the public

1. Introduction

Since the days of Mao Zedong, every Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader has tried to develop a set of political concepts that could at the same time endorse and reshape the inherited ideological lines of the Party. Deng Xiaoping began with his Three Modernizations, Jiang Zemin continued with his Three Represents, Hu Jintao introduced the idea of a Harmonious Society, and Xi Jinping will be remembered for his new era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. In Xi's new Socialism, one buzzword has stood out above the others: *wenming*, translated into English as "civilization, civility, or culture." The attention that *wenming* has had among Chinese politicians and scholars in the last two decades remains unmatched. One only must look at the large number of public messages employing *wenming* to understand the centrality of this concept within the Chinese political field. Achieving a proper degree of civilization in contemporary China is not just

empty rhetoric, but a powerful ideological system with important material and practical consequences.

Sociologically speaking, the discourse of civilization operates at two main levels. On the one hand, it functions as a form of institutional *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1992, 160) whose distribution is fully controlled by the Party-state. The CCP has created a series of rankings and incentives, with titles such as "civilized city" (*wenming chengshi*), "civilized unit" (*wenming danwei*), "civilized compound" (*wenming xiaoqu*), etc., to push local administrations to compete at the national level. Cities, provinces, districts, neighborhoods, and even residential compounds, seek to accumulate these titles of prestige that in the long run translate into better fiscal and administrative conditions.



Figure 1: These two plaques were located on the outer walls of Zhuzhai Huayuan Unit, in Xuanwu District, Nanjing; the message above indicates that between 2000 and 2001, the community unit was designated as a "Civilized Unit" (*Wenming Danwei*); the plaque below is an indicator of another form of economic and administrative incentive: "Exceptional foreign, private and joint ventures" (*Xianjin Sanzi Qiye*)

(Source: Author 2017)

On the other hand, *wenming* is also a form of embodied symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1992, 119) that circulates within the most elemental interactions of everyday life. The binomial civilized/uncivilized is measured through the accumulation of "quality" (*suzhi*), a term that "has been extended from a discourse of backwardness

and development (the quality of the masses) to encompass the minute social distinctions defining a 'person of quality' in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility" (Anagnost 2004, 190). These two dimensions, macro-sociological and micro-sociological, state-driven, and multi-focal, are two sides of the same coin since people classified as civilized tend to live in civilized spaces, while civilized spaces tend to produce and reproduce civilized people. In other words, *wenming* has become a symbolic poverty trap where only the already civilized have access to the benefits of civilization (Anagnost 1997; Pow 2010; Tomba 2014).

Moving a step further from this form of symbolic violence, there is still another aspect to consider when analyzing *wenming*, and that is its connection with traditional thought. As we will see in this chapter, civilization is often presented through Confucian precepts such as the rites *li*, humaneness *ren*, and righteousness or reciprocal justice *yi*. China has a long history of employing ethics and morality as political tools. For this reason, some authors have argued that the best way to approach the concept is by taking a more culturally oriented perspective that could consider the particularities of Confucian cosmology (Feuchtwang 2012; Kipnis 2007; Lin 2017).

In the last decades, the scientific production on the subject has been prolific and we have gained precious insights into *wenming's* anthropological corollaries (for more complete reviews of the state of the art, see Boutonnet (2011); Dynon (2008); Erbaugh (2008); Friedman (2004); Heberer (2020); or Romero-Moreno (2018). The definition of what exactly this ideological system is referring to, in concrete descriptions and situations, remains, however, surprisingly vague. This is the gap that I will try to fill in this chapter, offering a systematic classification of *wenming* messages through an analysis of the empirical data that I gathered during the twelve months of ethnographic work that I conducted in Nanjing, that is, hundreds of photographs and descriptions of urban billboards, banners, audiovisual clips, posters, textbooks, and pamphlets on public manners and civic behavior.

I begin the chapter with an explanation of the methodology employed to collect the empirical data and the logical system that I followed to create the four-layered typology of civilization messages. I then analyze the four categories individually, dwelling on their particular theoretical contexts. Finally, I synthesize the findings by discussing the unifying trait behind all these messages: an absolute notion of "the public."

2. Methodology and classification system

This research is part of a broader project where I try to shed new light on the study of political terms in China by reconstructing *wenming* through the dialectic analysis of three main objects: (i) urban texts (banners, advertisements and official campaigns); (ii) urban spaces (gated communities, malls and public infrastructure); and (iii) social interaction (face-to-face encounters and practical situations). With "dialectic analysis," I am referring here to the analytical distinction that David Harvey (2009), following the work of Henry Lefebvre, does between *conceived*, *experienced* and *lived spaces*. This methodology attempts to grasp the full picture of social phenomena by analyzing its discursive, spatial (embodied), and pragmatic dimensions as interdependent parts of a whole. In this chapter, I will focus, however, on *wenming's* discursive dimension and the first object of anthropological attention (i).

The data was collected between 2017 and 2018 during the twelve months I spent at Nanjing University as a guest researcher. Although I was offered the possibility of residing on the university campus, the ethnography I was proposing, namely, an urban ethnography that strongly relied on participant observation, required me to experience the city firsthand. Thus, I spent the first months wandering around Nanjing looking for potential ethnographic sites and key informants. I then started a photographic record of *wenming* urban texts. I began the delimitation of the observation area inductively, from large areas focusing on *wenming* banners, billboards, booklets, etc., to increasingly small spaces where I could consistently observe the interactions between people, these messages and the urban infrastructure.

I decided to place my research in Jiangsu province's capital because of the historical significance this metropolis had during the first years of the Republic (1912–1949). Chosen as China's main city under the Guomindang government, Nanjing served as a laboratory for the nationalistic and progressive ideology that still permeates China's political field (Leibold 2007, 38–43). The fact that according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2017), Jiangsu was the most urbanized province in the country and one of the territories with the highest proportion of rural migrants (31% of the population), was also important to ensure a high variance in the type of population (from the rich businessman, white-collar middle classes, university students, and foreign tourists, to rural migrant workers, and other excluded sectors of the population).

Despite the large number of civilization messages that I found, their content was of little variation, which allowed me to classify them through four simple inductive categories: (a) aesthetic-ritual *li*, (b) hygienic *weisheng*, (c) security *anquan* and (d) ecological *shengtai*. To establish this typology, I employed the following criteria. (I) The nominative logic of the messages themselves, that is, the explicit

and repeated appearance of the terms *li*, *weisheng*, *anquan*, and *shengtai* next to the word *wenming*. Each of these iterations, *li-wenming*, *weisheng-wenming*, *anquan-wenming*, and *shengtai-wenming* specify different instances of the general term “civilization”, linking it to identifiable actions and practices. (II) The physical emplacement of those messages; the concrete practical situations that the spatial context of these messages evoked. (III) Their inter-referential structure; the meaning of these texts was not always to be found explicitly in their content but in their relations with other *wenming* messages and spaces, their common vocabulary and aesthetics.

Although this typology is almost self-explanatory and serves to efficiently order the sub-concepts and actions that *wenming* brings together, its purpose is fundamentally analytical; meaning that in their context, the various civilization messages overlapped: *i.e.*, the same *wenming* campaign or platform could simultaneously display ecological, hygienic, security, and aesthetic-ritual messages with no categorical distinction between them. The boundaries that I have created here, therefore, need to be understood as gradations of the single cohesive ideological discourse that is *wenming*.

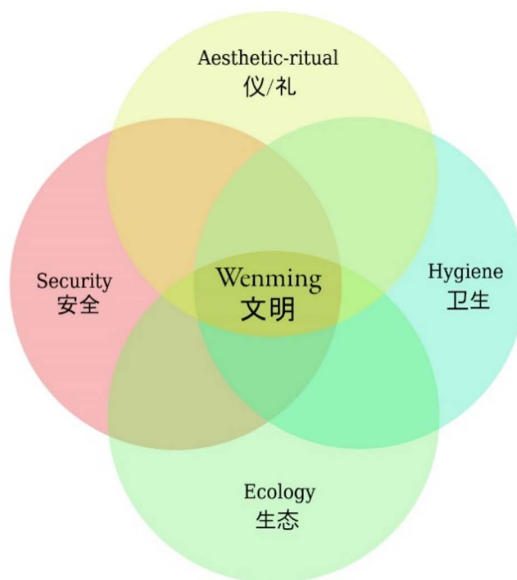


Figure 2: Venn's Diagram of the intersection between the different *wenming* typologies
(Source: Author)

3. The four dimensions of *wenming*

3.1. Aesthetic-ritual or *li wenming*

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), the discourse of civilization is presented in two different manners; as a set of practical recommendations and obligations that the population is expected to follow under the tenet of improving collective life (especially urban life): i.e., do not cross streets when the red light is on, maintain the line when waiting for public transportation, clean your hands after going to the bathroom, etc. These are actions that uphold a clear functional causation: i.e., ignoring the red lights may cause traffic accidents, not respecting turns in public transportation may affect service, not cleaning your hands after using the bathroom may cause the spreading of diseases, infections, etc.

Secondly, *wenming* also appeals to an array of attitudes and behaviors that mirror nothing more than their own moral contingency; behaving according to certain aesthetic and moral rites has the sole purpose of generating aesthetic and moral beings. These second types of civilization messages are what I call "aesthetic-ritual" or *li wenming*. Of all the *wenming* messages, aesthetic-ritual are the most ambiguous and open to interpretation, usually with poetic overtones that evoke the style of classical texts and proverbs (*chengyu*). The following image (Figure 3) corresponds to a billboard that I found on the external walls of a residential compound in Nanjing's Gulou district. At the front, we see the character *wenming* with an English translation on the right side, "civility", followed by the aphorism: *binbin youli rende youxu* ("refinement is ritual, humanity is ordered"). Then the text reads as follows:

Civility is a symbol of progress. An essential characteristic of a modern socialist nation. It is the basis for the construction of modern progressive culture. It means facing modernity, globalization, the future, national identity, and scientific knowledge. It caters directly to popular socialism as an essential trait to recovering the greatness of Chinese culture. The Chinese Dream.

One of the key characteristics of the aesthetic-ritual messages is the blend of Chinese traditional humanism and modern notions of "culture," "nation," and "progress." This corresponds with a trend that we have seen growing in popularity among Chinese scholars in the last decades. Intellectuals have collaborated with the state in the construction of a teleological project (the civilized nation) with the purpose of returning ethics and morality to the center of the political debate. As an example, we find the work of He Huaihong (He 1998), one of the most influential think tanks of the CCP, who suggests taking Adorno's *minima moralia* and combining it with elements of Confucian and Mencian thought, formulating what



Figure 3: Picture of a billboard in Gulou District, Nanjing

(Source: Author 2017)

he calls "an ethical base" (*dixian lunli*). Dai Mucai (2015) and Gao Weijie (2008) are also representatives of this mode of reinterpretation of the Confucian past under the light of modern institutions: i.e., the educational system, citizenship, public services, etc.



Figure 4: Picture of a banner in a public park in Nanjing's Xuanwu district; the message reads: "Through civic ritual and propriety [liyi] I advance; building a civilized citizenry, cooperating for the construction of a harmonious city"

(Source: Author 2017)



Figure 5: Picture of a banner in a public square of Nanjing's Gulou district; the message reads: "Civilized urban spot," followed by the name of the place "Peace Square," the address, and the campaign supervisor's contact

(Source: Author 2017)

The link between Confucian traditional thought and *wenming* is easy to establish. In traditional thought, the concept *ren* equates to Culture since it implies cultivation or, more specifically, self-cultivation. For Confucius, being human means learning humanity, learning to respect, through intellectual study and practice, the ethical relations that bound humankind as a whole: "self-cultivation is always a cultivation of a relational self in a circulation of forces or vital energies, auspiciousness, and the proper conduct of relations with others within an environment that is itself a circulation of vital energies" (Feuchtwang 2012, 113). Anyone is susceptible to becoming civilized (humanized) by learning their position within the cosmos and acting upon it. Is worth noting, though, that in *ren* reciprocity does not translate into equality, "in any way, it does not consist in placing the other, when they are inferior, on the same plane as oneself, preserving all the hierarchical dimensions of the social relation" (Cheng 2002, 63).

The practice of *ren*, as a form of civilizing act or humaneness, presupposes the acceptance of a given set of moral classifications. *Ren* can only be achieved through *li*, rites of social interaction that serve to produce and reproduce social order: the hierarchical classification between son and father, wife and husband, layperson and noble, etc. While the ethical character of humaneness reveals in the intersubjective practice of the rites, its moral dimension expresses through "shame" or the "extended self". The self is constantly exposed to the other's gaze by being accountable, not only for its own actions but also for the actions of others.

A man of learning, for Confucius, is one who constantly feels ashamed of himself for his improper conduct and who would avoid bringing shame to his master. [...] Confucius sees the sense of shame as the internal motivator of good deeds, a mechanism of self-discipline and the answer to

chaos and deterioration of morality in the society, so much so that he is sceptical about the usefulness of law and punishment in governing people. (Lin 2017, 38)

Confucianism, however, is not a monolithic ideology nor an essential trait of Chinese culture. In fact, as Fei Xiaotong (Fei et al. 1992) famously postulated, Confucianism goes beyond Confucius, understood as an array of practices and beliefs that have endured and transformed alongside the continuity and transformation of certain traits of the Chinese social structure (i.e., the fact that China has been, until very recently, mostly, a rural society). What is important to notice here is that this political use of self-disciplining and morality, in many ways, resonates with what authors like Foucault (1992), Elias (1987), or Butler (1997) have identified as the main methods of (self)control of our modern globalized world. In other words, in China, neoliberal "biopolitics" (the control of the body through the control of the soul-mind) may well synergize with Confucian forms of biopolitics that precede those of European origin.



Figure 6: Poster on the inner walls of a residential compound in Gulou District, Nanjing; below the illustration, we can see the name of the campaign: "Key values of Socialism" (*Shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*) which include: prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality, fairness, legality, patriotism, dedication, sincerity, and fraternity

(Source: Author 2017)

Aesthetic-ritual messages codify the interaction between the *self* and the *other* through contexts that exceed hygienic, security and ecological functionality. I observed this in the multitude of messages that appealed to the "formality of language" or "etiquette of speech" (*yantan zhi li*): "listening attentively and patiently, with friendship and sincerity, using a civic and tempered language." They referred to the "ceremony of rites" (*yantan zhi li*): "respect and strengthen the rites of etiquette, follow the formalities of military salute, live with respect and ritual reverence." It was in these types of messages that patriotic references and nationalist symbols were used the most: flags, military uniforms, cultural icons such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, pagodas, etc.

The following picture (Figure 6) corresponds to one of the most repeated aesthetic-ritual messages in Nanjing, the "Eight Rituals and Four Ceremonies" (*Bali Siyi*). The poster reads: "rites [*li*] of presentation, rites of the table, rites of speech, rites of the poet, rites of the walker, rites of contemplation, rites of the tourist, and rites of etiquette [*li zhi yi*]; etiquette during infancy, etiquette during youth, etiquette during maturity, and etiquette during adulthood."

Other *wenming* messages were less explicit in their link with traditional thought. Due to their strong moral character and their lack of direct cause-effect correlation, they can also be classified as aesthetic-ritual messages. Inside Nanjing's subway, for example, small television screens showed animated clips of approximately 30 seconds with multiple everyday life situations. Through short animations, the government encouraged young people to take care of their elders, praise the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country, and maintain "a proper personal appearance" (*yi biao*): "dress duly and clean, do not show your belly or intimate parts in public spaces." The following billboard (Figure 7) is another example of an aesthetic-ritual message that blurs the line between the purely moral, and the causal-functional. The text describes in length one of the "uncivic attitudes" (*bu wenming xingwei*):¹

The illustration shows a scene where a depersonalized colorless character, who is about to travel or who has just returned from a trip (as indicated by the suitcase), finds himself talking on the phone employing, as expressed by the reaction of the other characters, an excessive volume of voice. To his right, we see what looks like a blond woman (here, the illustration is colored) turning away from the central character. On the left, we see a man (also colored) admonishing the central noisy character. The description and the illustration present together noise and

¹ Literary: In public spaces there should be no noise, there should be no shouting and a low tone should be always employed. One must consider that in public spaces everyone is being heard. Headphones should always be used to listen to videos and music. When answering a phone call, one should always control the volume. When attending a show or match, participants should not be distracted; booing in these situations is always out of place.



Figure 7: Picture of a billboard next to a metro station in Gulou District, Nanjing
(Source: Author 2017)

personal dislike as universal moral notions that need to be admonished regardless of context and social position.

3.2 Hygiene or *weisheng wenming*

In China, hygienic practices are referred to through the term *weisheng* which translates into English as "hygiene" or "health." Although currently *weisheng* falls under the broader umbrella of the *wenming* teleological project, its utilization as an ideological category precedes that of civilization. In fact, to find the origins of the political use of *weisheng*, we have to look at what came about in mid-nineteen century Europe. The proliferation of urban industrial settlements, alongside the scientific discovery of bacteria and germs, generated the conditions of possibility for the appearance of a public discourse that directly associated poverty with sickness and pollution. All around Europe, medical experts, urban planners, and bureaucrats established a clear "dependency between a society's level of civilization and its level of hygienic development. [...] To achieve a proper degree of civilization, hygienists viewed morality and social intelligence as paramount, a goal only feasible through direct instruction" (Larrea 1997, 246).

The spread of hygienist ideology through the colonies coincided with a period in which China was (internally and externally) perceived as a sick nation. The "leaders

of the new republic constantly linked the need to improve propriety, personal hygiene, and sanitation to the discourse of modernization and international respect" (Erbaugh 2008, 640). The word *weisheng* became synonymous with national rejuvenation, an idea that was conspicuously articulated in relation to the female body. Lin (2004) analyzes several commercial ads and literary works of the Kuomintang period (1919–1937) to show how the image of the hygienic Chinese woman (whose duty was to oversee a clean and healthy household) was exploited for commercial and class-distinction purposes. "Sanitation and the creation of an aesthetically pleasing environment, both of which are important signs of modernity, inevitably pits the middle-class housewife against her lower-class maidservant. Although hygiene in this story is used mainly to underscore the characterization of Rubi as a new Chinese woman, it is nevertheless clear that hygienic practice is the yardstick by which the middle-class measures its difference as well as its claim to modernity" (Lin 2004, 220).

Once again, hygienism goes beyond social and biological functionality, directly related to the triumph of the petit-bourgeoisie as a class with universal claims. If as Larrea (1997, 246) points out, the provenance of the European hygienist movement is to be found in religious Christian thought, *weisheng* ideology is better understood as an amalgamation of genuinely Chinese ideas, and illustrated, class-driven conceptions of hygiene imported from the West. In this sense, Chinese hygienism fits perfectly with the traditional Confucian view of the female body as an avatar of cleanness, purity, and ritual appearances (*rong*); in the words of Banzhao, the famous Han dynasty Confucian scholar (80 CE):

To guard carefully her chastity; to control circumspectly her behavior; in every motion to exhibit modesty; and to model each act on the best usage, this is womanly virtue. To choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and nor to weary others with much conversation, may be called the characteristics of womanly words. To wash and scrub filth away; to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean; to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free from disgraceful filth, may be called the characteristics of womanly bearing. (Swann 1932, 89–90)

Today, *weisheng's* target on women is less explicit than during the Guomindang years, except perhaps when it refers to particularly feminized topics such as infant feeding (Gottschang 2001; Chen 2001). The weathered panel that I found next to a subway station in Xuanwu district can be taken as representative of the set of *weisheng wenming* messages that I came across all around Nanjing (Figure 8): "Pay attention to hygiene and you will build a beautiful and happy home." The title is accompanied by a series of personal recommendations to improve daily life prophylaxis: "wash your hands before eating, brush your teeth every morning, shower daily, cut your hair and nails regularly, use clean clothes, do not smoke, do not get drunk,

exercise regularly, allow children to be vaccinated according to the administration's plans, update your public health information." Then the panel moves from bodily habits to environmental cautions: "open your windows, ventilate rooms frequently, make sure the air is clean and fresh. Clean the soot of your kitchen, use a smoke extractor, sweep the rooms regularly, and use water or bleach to mop the floors. Do not smoke indoors, grow a few plants, grow cacti to purify the air."

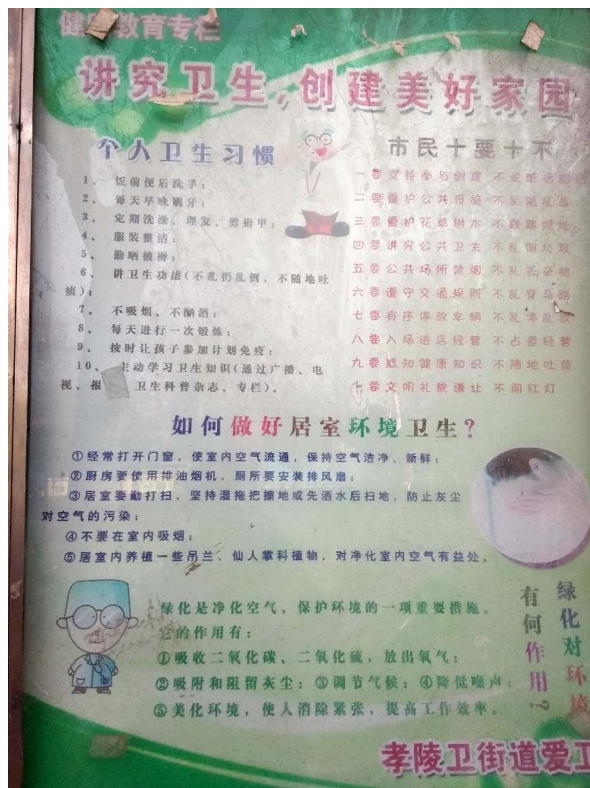


Figure 8: The panel was situated near a metro station in Nanjing's Xuanwu district
(Source: Author 2017)

Public toilets were a natural location for hygienic messages; plaques explaining how to keep toilets clean, asking users not to "step on" Crapper-style toilets² (as opposed to hole-in-the-floor toilets), and to maintain an aseptic internal space. Messages announcing the prohibition of smoking inside those places were also

² The sit-shaped toilet was invented by an English man named Thomas Crapper in the mid-eighteen century; introduced for the first time in China by the British through Hong Kong and the colonial concessions (DuPont and Bean 1978).

very abundant. In fact, at a legal level, the most relevant impact of the *wenming* hygienic campaigns has taken place through two relatively recent measures: the anti-tobacco law and the hygienic classification of the restaurant sector.

The first measure was introduced by the Beijing local government in 2015 with the intention of banning tobacco in all the public and semi-public spaces of the city (restaurants, bars, stations, public transportation, etc.), and was later incorporated into the Party's thirteenth Five-Year Plan under the slogan: "For a Healthy China" (*Weisheng Zhongguo*). The law has been since then extended to most metropolitan areas of the country (Schwartlander 2017). The success of the measure derives from its normative status, with cumulative fines of 50 RMB (approximately six euros).



Figure 9: Plaque on the external walls of a public toilet in Nanjing's Xuanwu district; The message reads: "Beauty and Peace. Love civility, cultivate hygiene, make every day healthy"

(Source: Author 2018)



Figure 10: Poster on the internal walls of a public toilet inside Nanjing's metro station; the message reads: "Smoking is not allowed, the offender shall be fined 50 RMB;" below, we find the address of the office in charge of the campaign

(Source: Author 2017)

The second hygienic law is that of the restaurant classification, prior to the smoking prohibition, also inaugurated for the first time in Beijing in 2005 with

the proximity of the Olympic Games. This legal measure classifies food-related businesses according to three hygienic scores (here the term *anquan* [safety] is also used alongside *weisheng*): A (maximum grade, accompanied by a green smiley icon), B (medium ratio, accompanied by a yellow emoticon with a restrained smile) and C (lowest ratio, a red sad emoticon). The law obliges all establishments to display these qualifiers publicly, always visible to everyone (Zhou and Liu 2018). During my period in Nanjing, I only found one place that had received an A rating (a chain-type noodle restaurant in Gulou district); the vast majority being type B and C. Informal street-food stalls were left out of this official grading system that immediately identified them as “outside the law.”

Finally, we can discuss one important topic of the *wenming* campaigns as belonging to the hygienic category: the anti-spitting messages. Today, the habit of spitting is identified nationally and internationally as a typical (bad) habit of the Chinese population. Indeed, the foreign press helped raise the anecdote to the category of stereotype, often revealing orientalist positions.³ It has been the Chinese government, however, that has placed sputum at the center of the public



Figure 11: Plaque in a public park of Nanjing's Xuanwu district; the message reads: "Do not spit, and do not throw gum on the ground" (Source: Author 2017)

³ Take these two newspaper articles as an example of the attention that this phenomenon receives internationally; one is from the *New York Times* and the other is from an equally important Spanish newspaper called *La Vanguardia* (Garcia 2019; Yardley 2007).

eye (Brady 2009). I found *wenming* signs alluding to the verb *tutan* [to spit] mostly in open spaces such as squares, parks, and public paved areas of Nanjing.



Figure 12: Illustration inside the school booklet: "Morality and Society, Activity Notebook;" the message reads: "Healthy civility, for you, for me. Do not spit on the ground"

(Source: Image reprinted from Yi 2020)

The problem with the anti-spitting campaigns as being purely hygienic is that, beyond the word *jiankang* (the most common way of generically referring to "health"), these messages did not make any further reference to the spread of diseases or to the dangers of miasmas. For obvious reasons, this may have changed after the Covid-19 pandemic; nonetheless, in 2018 the possibility of spreading maladies through saliva in open-air spaces was at worst doubtful (Abrams 2013). Public restrooms, spaces that as I have already mentioned were favored for the emplacement of hygienic messages, did not allude in any way to the action of spitting (something that, in practice, occurred regularly). It is reasonable to think, therefore, that the current situation in China is not very different from that of nineteenth-century Paris or New York, at the peak of the hygienist movement, where "the rise of anti-spitting legislation was on one level a practical response to a legitimate medical concern, but it frequently overlapped with wider issues concerning the consolidation of the middle class and the social control of the working classes" (Abrams 2013, 418).

3.3 Security or *anquan wenming*

Hygienic civility showed how categorical limits can be diffuse: i.e., when speaking of the classification of restaurants and food-related businesses, the term *anquan* is often used to speak of what, in fact, is a hygienic-type security message. "Safety" is also employed in China, however, with a certain autonomy with respect to other civic messages, especially when referring to the prevention of dangers and physical harm. Inside Nanjing's subway, short clips on general safety were broadcast, usually presenting animated characters (anthropomorphic animals or objects) in situations of peril that they have to overcome: i.e. the perils of leaving a cloth on heaters, employing electrical appliances next to flammable objects, leaving the kitchen gas on, etc. Other *anquan wenming* signs warned citizens of the prohibition of introducing certain objects inside the stations: weapons, sharp objects, pyrotechnics, and small vehicles (like bicycles and electric scooters). The consumption of food and drink was also prohibited under the same premise of maintaining civic security.

Outdoors, *anquan* messages urged citizens to respect traffic signs, avoid throwing objects from windows or elevated places, not construct without permits, and not make use of fireworks of any kind. The 2007 ban on fireworks in all major cities of the country was an important security bill considering the significance that these items have traditionally had in China during the celebration of festivities and religious activities. The argument for the prohibition was both security-related (the avoidance of fires) and ecological (the reduction of AQI levels and airborne pollutants). Recent scientific studies have proved this second argument to be objectively true (Yu et al. 2021).



Figure 13: An official message announcing the prohibition of fireworks in Xiaguan District, Nanjing: "Do not buy, do not use fireworks"

(Source: Author 2018)

On a second level, the prohibition on fireworks celebrations can be associated with another key idea of the security rhetoric: the non-occupation of urban spaces. In Nanjing, I found a significant number of official posters, pamphlets, and clips criticizing unregulated urban activities (i.e., street-food stalls, "blanket sellers," outdoor parties, spontaneous dancing groups, etc.) The following billboard (Figure 14) describes one of the "Big Eight Noes" (Ba ge bu), that is, "Not constructing illegally," part of the campaign "Civic Standards" (Wenming Guifan): "Do not invade public spaces, do not violate public construction ordinances, do not occupy both sides of lanes, do not accumulate and stack objects on the streets, do not carry out reforms by expanding over the public space, do not set up vendor stalls, do not run illegal street businesses, do not occupy the in-between spaces of gated communities, green areas, parking spots and basements. Do not employ building structures, public spaces, trees, electricity poles, etc., to hang objects. Do not use ropes and cords to dry clothes or food in public facilities."

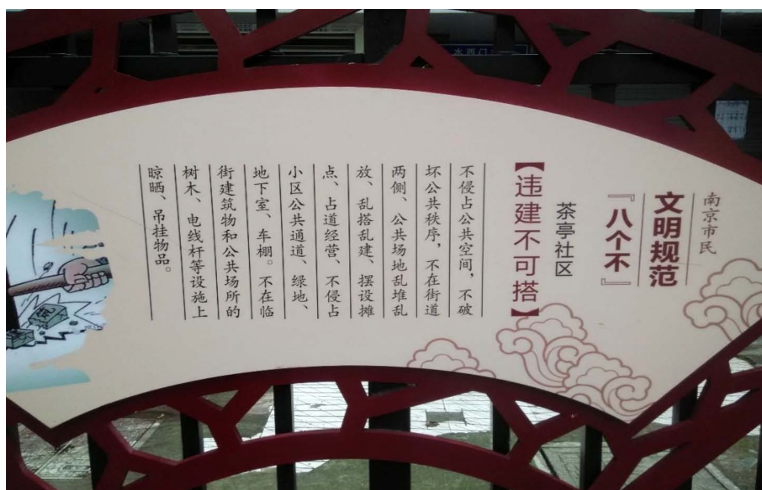


Figure 14: Billboard placed on the external walls of a gated community in Nanjing's Xuanwu district
(Source: Author 2017)

All around Nanjing, security checkpoints were conceptually framed under the slogan "make civilized travels; transit with safety" (*wenming jiaotong, anquan chuxing*). These messages were mainly found on highways, and police stations (although Nanjing's metro also regularly broadcast traffic security messages). In Figure 15, we see an example of these types of *wenming* banners: "Abide by traffic norms, care for life and security," followed by the trope: "Traveling with civility; all starts with oneself." Then the extended text: "Transit with safety. Is not only about

one's own life and safety but is also the reflection of our care for others, is about construing and being in harmony with the most important factors of society. To rise awareness when traveling, to not forget about traffic safety. In our daily lives, traffic security surrounds us."

This allusion to public safety and security was often accompanied by security cameras and CCTV systems. I counted the number of surveillance devices that I found from my apartment in Zhonglingjie to the next metro station in Xiaolingwei (an approximate distance of 2 km), locating up to 27 cameras located at different angles along the route. Omnidirectional devices at the entrances of urbanizations, at the entrances of the subway, hanging from electric poles and traffic lights on highways; directional-style cameras placed at bus stops, etc. In this space, the density of surveillance devices was equivalent to one camera every fifteen meters. These urban artifacts need to be seen as an extension of the *wenming anquan* campaigns, a permanent reminder of the perils of metropolitan life that transcends subjective experience in the form of common sense or, more specifically, "public security."



Figure 15: Public message on traffic security
(Source: Dangyang Office of Elementary Schools 2020)

3.4 Ecology or *shengtai wenming*

The term "ecological civility," *shengtai wenming*, corresponds to the most recent use of the *wenming* concept. Its popularization began after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games when the government launched an ambitious international

campaign to promote China as a green nation (Brady 2009). The increasing ecological concern is also a response to years of civilian complaints about the serious health problems that air and water pollution has caused, especially, in the provincial peripheries (Percival 2011; Lora-Wainwright 2013). Thus, in the last decades, the Chinese government has opted to transform the ecological setback into a strategic advantage, reorienting the country's technological development towards very lucrative green renewable models (Percival 2011).

Nanjing's *shengtai wenming* messages mostly alluded to personal activities such as recycling, reducing the use of plastic, saving energy, saving paper and food, preserving green spaces, and protecting the environment. In several restaurants, I found messages encouraging customers to "clean their plates" and consume food responsibly. Messages from urban bins all around Nanjing asked citizens to recycle their waste.



Figure 16: Garbage disposal emplaced inside one of Nanjing's subway stations, Xuanwu District;

the message reads: "Construing the civilized person, do not take away the subway tokens; leaving the token in the bin is leaving civility"

(Source: Author 2017)

Chinese elementary schools teach, as part of their mandatory curricula, courses on ethics and moral behavior *Pinde yu Shehui Huodong* [Activities on Morality and Society]. Reading these courses' booklets, I found a special emphasis on the promotion of ecological civility and "environmental protection" (*huanjing baohu*): i.e., advocating for activities such as tree planting, bird protection, garbage recollection, paper saving, etc. As the booklets show, these activities are often endorsed



Figure 17: Poster found inside a restaurant in Xuanwu District, Nanjing; the message reads: "Cultivating a frugal morality – For a civilized dinner – When I clean the plate, I honor it."
(Source: Author 2017)

by the Young Pioneers program (*Shaoxiandui*, an elementary school league that serves as preparation for joining the Communist Youth League and the Party). Nanjing's Young Pioneers organization had a special sub-branch called "Young Environmentalist Heroes" (*Yingxiaoxue de Huanbaoxiaozu*). The following extract corresponds to the presentation of this environmentalist group through Jiangsu province school booklets:

To the entire League of Young Pioneers: Greetings! Our families are now richer and more prosperous than in the past, however, it is possible that the environment of our towns has gradually deteriorated: the skies are no longer as blue as before, the air is no longer as pure, the ponds that originally were crystal clear now have blackened and are smelly. Brand-new shoes often turn black from the street's dirty water; reading time is often disturbed by the noise that comes from the windows. Our town is the place we grew up, we all love our hometowns and now we want to participate in their construction. Our hometowns have to have a beautiful environment, its people need to make it comfortable and pleasant. Indeed, we are still young, but we also have a responsibility regarding the care and improvement of the environment of our hometowns. For this reason, we have formed the Young Environmentalist Heroes to propose the following measures before the entire league of Young Pioneers. (1) To value every single tree and plant in our hometowns, every mountain, and every river, and reject the hunting of wild animals. (2) To reject any situation that harms the environment, to discourage any attitude that could damage the landscape. (3) To actively carry out campaigns and disseminate messages

for the protection of the environment. (4) To make efforts to promote the idea of green culture and beautiful hometowns. (See original in Annex I)

"Environment" serves here as a mediator between subjective and societal action. The individual assumes the ultimate responsibility for the environmental order within an absolute notion of the "us" that crystallizes in the abstraction of the "hometown." While the main focus of *shengtai wenming* messages was to present ecological responsibility as a personal matter, at the same time, the same ecological rhetoric was employed to promote urban growth and economic development. That was the case with the Pukou district's "Green Towers," that is, a colossal project (also announced via banners and urban messages) involving the construction of several skyscrapers that will be employed, on the one hand, as "vertical forests" to purify the city's air, and on the other, as a high-end residential area.



Figure 18: Photographs of the "Green Towers" construction project in Nanjing, Pukou's District

(Source: Boeri 2022)

In this type of spatial context, *shengtai* and the word "environment" gained another layer of significance beyond the avoidance of ecological dangers. The following message (Figure 19) corresponds to a billboard placed on the external walls of a gated compound in Nanjing's Xuanwu District; the banner was created to promote Xuanwu Lake and the natural park surrounding the area. The message reads as follows: "For the building of a strong economy, the enrichment of the common people, the creation of a beautiful environment, and the construction of a civilized-level society." The photograph then features a group of young heterosexual

Han couples sailing on a boat on Xuanwu Lake. They all dress following calculated "Western-style" clothing (the brides dressed in white and the grooms in black suits) with the local touch of the red scarves (which is the traditional color of the bride's dress in Chinese weddings).



Figure 19: Billboard placed on the external walls of a gated community in Xuanwu District, Nanjing
(Source: Author 2017)

4. Conclusions: "The public" under construction

As introduced at the beginning of the chapter, one of the purposes of the network of *wenming* messages and campaigns that extends throughout China is to create a common, quantifiable, vocabulary for all the administrations of the territory. Although we often speak about China as a single political entity (the Party-state), we must bear in mind that the Chinese government is not completely homogeneous. The CCP must still navigate the internal contradictions that arise when dealing with Minority Political Groups (MPG), business-based associations, and grass-root movements to "shape the sort of civil society it wants, one which creates a system of alliances and ideology which reproduces the consent and support necessary for its continued rule" (Groot 1997, 503). The increasing autonomy of local governments has only strengthened these already existing internal tensions. Thus, *wenming* urban messages function as physical indicators of the Party's influence

over the territory. All administrations must follow the same political vocabulary, from the gated compound to the community, from the neighborhood to the district, and from the city to the province. In other words, one of the main targets of the government's civilization campaigns is the government itself.

This form of epistemological homologation is not only administrative but also moral, in the broader cosmological sense. As identified by many anthropologists and sociologists, one key characteristic of Chinese society is its prevalence of family-based ties, circles of proximity (*guanxi*), and the importance of social capital (*mianzi*) (Fei et al. 1992; Yan 2009;). This is not a unique trait of Chinese culture (an immutable essence), but the consequence of concrete historical practices within specific temporal and spatial frames. In the past, the Chinese government had already attempted to transform this sociological familism into a more Hegelian notion of the public good. The first significant attack against traditional relationality began under the rule of Mao Zedong. In socialist theory, *guanxi* needed to be replaced by units of production (the *danwei*) where the entire process of socialization would take place regardless of kinship loyalties (Mao 1977). Here, charismatic figures like Mao embodied the revolutionary project and the abstract and universal notion of the 'us' contained within the idea of the proletariat (Chance 1991). The key difference between the Maoist and the post-1978 ideological frame is that in the latter the motto of equality (a classless society) was openly abandoned.

What aesthetic-ritual, hygienic, security and ecological messages have in common is the construction of an absolute notion of the public good. They present a sense of "risk" (hygienic, ecological, and security-related) that creates an undifferentiated social space. Each body becomes the symbol of an absolute notion of the pure and the polluting, the healthy and the unhealthy, sometimes coinciding with unquestionable biological limits (avoiding diseases and physical harm), other times presented in much more ambiguous terms (i.e., cutting your hair, not getting drunk, not occupying urban spaces, punishing informal economy, etc.). Here, the notion of "public space" manifests as an almost mystical "non-place" (Augé 2000), a ground zero arena without history, differences, and, at least, virtually, without inequalities. What used to be just urban life gains now a symbolic value: the representation of progress, modernity, Chineseness, the nation, and the Party. Social activities in urban spaces must receive institutional recognition, conflict must be top-down controlled (harmonized *hexie*), and aesthetic worth must be prioritized. Public spaces must be freed from informal vendors and poverty, hanging clothes, drying food, outdoor furniture, and, more generally, from any form of extension of the familiar space outside the residential limit.

Thus, the discourse of civilization in China reproduces the same classist overtones that hygienist ideology already showed during the first years of the Republic, putting at the center of civilization those persons that can afford to conceive the

public good as nothing more than an aesthetic symbol of purity, progress, and modernity. Here "the public" becomes a form of control, whether this is incarnated by the group of anonymous individuals that judge your looks, your manners, and your bodily expressions, or by the state's hyper-technological system of digital surveillance.

In this sense, *wenming* differs little from the Western concept of civilization analyzed by Norbert Elias in his famous book *The Civilizing Process* (1987), a historical process consisting of the pacification of individual and collective agents in favor of a legitimated monopoly of violence represented by the state. While, as shown in section 3.1, *wenming* utilizes the notions of humaneness *ren*, rites *li*, and reciprocal justice *yi* to describe the *wenming* project in a genuinely Chinese vocabulary, the relational core of these philosophical concepts is completely ignored. One particularity of both the Western notion of *civilité* and *wenming* is their lack of phenomenological attributes.

However, we also said that in traditional Confucian cosmology the consideration of the "other's gaze" is a crucial part of the social mechanism from which morality transforms into an efficient political system. What *wenming* discourse shows us is how the Chinese government is trying to adapt this traditional frame into the new scenery of the nation-state, global institutions, and market economy (the "international gaze"). As insightfully put by Erbaugh (2008, 628), "the scholarly and pop culture obsessions with face, networks, and connections obscure the reality that strangers and others without connections do not merit face work. If you are an insider, you may be treated well. If not, it doesn't matter how you are treated."

I argue that *wenming* is better understood as a part of a post-Confucian biopolitical ideology that, in many ways, differs from its Western counterpart. Chinese civilization messages present a non-relational, absolute, notion of the public, but they also cross the line between what in the Western world would be considered "personal" or "private" in a very Confucian manner: the personal is political. We have seen this in several *wenming* texts (i.e., brush your teeth daily, do not get drunk, sweep the floors of your home regularly, be careful with leaving the cloth on the heaters, take care of your personal appearance, etc.) Here, freedom and personal responsibility are still very different from the hegemonic version of "individual freedom" found in most countries of European tradition.

Following this argument, we find in contemporary China sociological evidence pointing toward the emergence of a new type of middle-class stratum much more compatible with authoritarian governance, and a blurred distinction between civil and non-civil society. This is what authors like Tomba (2014, 21) defend when employing concepts such as "engineered consensus," namely, an internalized set of psychological and physical dispositions (*habitus*) generated "through a variety of governmental techniques, including the monopoly over ideology, the active

promotion of the interests of certain social groups, the reproduction of chronic dependence on state welfare among the new poor, limited forms of autonomy, the specter of social control and repression, or a mix of social and administrative institutions." However, this argument may well be underestimating the type of socialization that is happening today in Chinese urbanities.

In this chapter, I have focused on *wenming's* ideological (discursive) dimension. Nonetheless, the definition of the public good is not by all means immune to the contingencies of actual public life. Chinese metropolises are spaces of extreme social heterogeneity, and despite the state's efforts to segregate urban morphology through walls and barriers, the urban-born, the rural-born, the rich, the poor, and the middle classes, all still interact daily sharing the same streets, squares, stations, public toilets, parks, etc. This constant exchange and amalgamation of *habitus* is, at the same time, a constant contestation and renovation of what constitutes, in practical terms, "the public." Thus, a further investigation remains to be conducted regarding the effects of this other direction of the *wenming* phenomenon, namely, the influence of these interactions and practices over the state's *wenming* discourse.

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