

(Un)Civilizing the Paris Olympics Opening Ceremony: Competing Narratives of Civilization, “Coloniality,” and Transversal Alignment

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Scholarship on “non-Western” civilizational discourse in international relations remains largely limited to the versions crafted or endorsed by the state. This paper takes the representation of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony on Chinese social media as an entry point to exploring vernacular and competing narratives of civilization in global cultural politics. Drawing on data from multiple platforms, I scrutinize visions of civilizational progress, decay, and betrayal, interlaced with contested imaginaries of “China”, “France”, and “the West”, in celebratory and demonizing discourses on the spectacle. First, I argue that ideas of “civilizational standards” have always been co-produced, appropriated, and negotiated by actors from the peripheries, rather than monopolized by the centre. A nuanced and situational reading of the celebratory discourse shows how users employ civilizational and universalist vocabularies to contest locally hegemonic structures, which may simultaneously reproduce and challenge homonationalist logics. Secondly, the paper contributes to the emerging literature on the co-opting of the anti-colonial language in reactionary politics, showing that in this case, the accusation of coloniality is turned inwards to target the internal other, whose identification with progressive values is recast as colonial subservience and betrayal. Finally, I show that the trope of “Western civilizational decay” and certain constructions of difference/affinities are instrumental to queerphobic nationalist narratives. However, civilizational signifiers such as “West” and “East” function in digital reactionary discourse less as a tool for narrating cultural distinctiveness than as flexible transnational codes, allowing for transversal alignment to emerge across conventional geopolitical and ideological boundaries.

Los trabajos académicos sobre el discurso civilizacional «no occidental» en el campo de las relaciones internacionales siguen estando, en gran medida, limitados a las versiones elaboradas o respaldadas por el Estado. Este artículo toma la representación de la ceremonia de apertura de los Juegos Olímpicos de París en las redes sociales chinas como un punto de entrada para explorar narrativas vernáculas contrapuestas sobre la civilización en la política cultural global. Utilizamos datos de múltiples plataformas que nos permiten analizar visiones del progreso, la decadencia y la traición de la civilización, entrelazadas con imaginarios disputados de «China», «Francia» y «Occidente», en discursos tanto celebratorios como demonizantes sobre la ceremonia de apertura. Primero, argumentamos que las ideas de «estándares civilizacionales» siempre han sido coproducidas, apropiadas y negociadas por actores de las periferias, en lugar de estar monopolizadas por el centro. Realizamos una lectura matizada y situacional del discurso celebratorio que demuestra cómo los usuarios emplean vocabularios civilizacionales y universalistas con el fin de cuestionar estructuras hegemónicas locales, que pueden reproducir, y al mismo tiempo desafiar, las lógicas homonacionalistas. En segundo lugar, el artículo contribuye a la literatura emergente en materia de la apropiación del lenguaje anticolonial en la política reaccionaria, demostrando que, en este caso, la acusación de colonialidad se dirige hacia adentro con el fin de atacar al «otro» interno, cuya identificación con los valores progresistas se reinterpreta como servidumbre colonial y como traición. Finalmente, demostramos que el tropo de la «decadencia de la civilización occidental», así como ciertas construcciones de diferencias/afinidades, resultan instrumentales para las narrativas nacionalistas queerfóbicas. Sin embargo, los significantes civilizacionales como «Occidente» y «Oriente» funcionan en el discurso reaccionario digital no tanto como una herramienta para narrar la distintividad cultural sino, más bien, como códigos transnacionales flexibles que permiten que surja una alineación transversal a través de las fronteras geopolíticas e ideológicas convencionales.

La recherche sur le discours civilisationnel « non occidental » en relations internationales se limite encore largement aux versions créées ou approuvées par l'État. Cet article prend la représentation de la cérémonie d'ouverture des Jeux olympiques de Paris sur les réseaux sociaux chinois comme point d'entrée pour explorer les narratifs vernaculaires et concurrents de la civilisation en politique culturelle mondiale. Me fondant sur des données issues de plusieurs plateformes, j'examine les visions du progrès civilisationnel, de la décadence et de la trahison, qui s'enchevêtrent avec des imaginaires contestés de la « Chine », de la « France » et de « l'Occident » dans des discours qui célèbrent ou diabolisent le spectacle. D'abord, j'affirme que les idées de « normes civilisationnelles » ont toujours été cocréées, appropriées et négociées par des acteurs des périphéries, et non monopolisées par le centre. Une lecture nuancée et situationnelle du discours de célébration montre que les utilisateurs emploient des vocabulaires civilisationnels et universalistes pour contester les structures hégémoniques locales, qui peuvent simultanément reproduire et remettre en cause les logiques homonationalistes. Ensuite, l'article contribue à la littérature émergente sur la récupération du langage anticolonial en politique réactionnaire, en montrant que dans ce cas, l'accusation de colonialité est orientée vers l'intérieur, pour viser l'autre interne, dont l'identification aux valeurs progressistes est transformée en asservissement colonial et trahison. Enfin, je montre que le trope de la « décadence civilisationnelle occidentale » et certaines constructions de la différence/des affinités s'avèrent décisifs dans les narratifs nationalistes queerphobiques. Cependant, les signifiants civilisationnels d'« Occident » ou d'« Orient » n'agissent pas tant dans le discours réactionnaire numérique comme un outil pour raconter la distinction culturelle que comme des codes transnationaux flexibles, permettant l'émergence d'un alignement transversal en dépit des frontières géopolitiques et idéologiques conventionnelles.

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Introduction

Many have noted that resurgent civilizational discourse plays a key role in various forms of authoritarian, ethnonationalist, misogynistic, and illiberal politics across the Global North and South (Stewart 2020; Maher, Gunaydin, and McSwiney 2021; Chacko 2023; Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). The concept of civilization in the plural (CiP) facilitates particularistic claims about reified notions of culture and tradition, which tend to exclude and suppress internal difference, while enabling a reassertion of difference against what has been described as liberal “standards of civilization” (Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023) at the international level. However, studies of “non-Western” civilizational discourses in politics and international relations (IR) remain largely limited to the versions crafted or endorsed by the state. This risks not only overlooking vernacular and popular narratives of civilization, but also the ways in which state civilizationism is itself a hegemonic ideological project sustained through the silencing and marginalization of competing voices within.

This paper takes the transnational reinterpretation of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony on Chinese social media as an entry point to exploring competing narratives of civilization, “coloniality,” and transversal alignment in global cultural politics. On July 26, 2024, the Summer Olympics opened in Paris with a spectacular opening ceremony along the River Seine. Showcasing flamboyant, awe-inspiring performances with a thematic emphasis on feminism and LGBTQ inclusivity, the ceremony also provoked backlashes across the world, particularly over a segment seen by some as a blasphemous mockery of the Last Supper. Observers have noted that the ceremony temporarily became “the French epicentre of a ‘global culture war’” (Groupe d’études géopolitiques 2024) waged by a “reactionary internationale” (Michelsen, De Orellana, and Buranelli 2025) of ideologically and geopolitically diverse allies.

Within its original context of production, one might critique the opening ceremony from the perspective of how the radicality of feminism and queer liberation is captured by the built-in grammar of “staging the nation” in the representational politics of the Olympic opening ceremonies (Hogan 2003). Furthermore, researchers of critical IR and geography have examined the civilizational politics of queer visibility in global mega-events like the Olympics and Eurovision contests (Hubbard and Wilkinson 2015; Baker 2017). For example, Vernon (2024, 17) provides a critical reading of the civilizationist agenda at play at the 2022 Commonwealth Games, noting how depictions of a liberal, inclusive, and progressive Britain as the “zenith of civilizational development” conceal ongoing colonial violence and exclusion. My focus here, however, shifts from the representational politics of visibility in the opening ceremony itself to the transnational and polarized re-representations of feminist and queer visibility in the spectacle across different Chinese social media platforms. I scrutinize how the global media event offers members of the digital public a discursive opportunity to produce competing narratives of civilizational progress and decay, interlaced with contested imaginaries of “China,” “France,” and “the West.”

Favorable viewers on Chinese social media use engagement with the spectacle to expound a vision of universal

progress, identify with feminism and queer inclusive values, and develop a critique of locally hegemonic statist and masculinist cultures. The fact that the ceremony was broadcast on state media, which has acted as a mouthpiece for officially sanctioned heteropatriarchal nationalism, generates unexpected feelings of empowerment and joy among viewers, even though such a subversive reading of the show in its original context of production is unlikely. However, elements of the celebratory discourse also reproduce familiar spatio-temporal hierarchies and French exceptionalism. By contrast, the demonizing (in a quite literal sense, given the high frequency of the word “demons”) discourse on the ceremony interprets it, predictably, as signaling the “collapse of Western civilization.” However, while similarities and differences between “Chinese” and “Western” cultures are tactically cited, the discourse is less concerned with cultural particularity than with defending the coherence, purity, masculinity, and order of civilization itself. Conservative nationalists thus identify with the international far right, citing the global backlash approvingly, while also ironically producing a sense of superiority by framing the Chinese reaction as secular and the “Western” reaction as religiously rooted. Furthermore, although social justice is usually criticized as “Western cultural hegemony” in right-wing nationalist discourse, here the accusation of coloniality is turned inwards to target the internal other—the favorable viewers expressing feminist and queer solidarity and critical of statist narratives, who are labeled as *zhiren* (殖人) or “mentally colonized.”

I make a few interventions on the discussion of contemporary civilizational politics and the global right. First, I argue that ideas of “civilizational standards,” whether or not associated with liberal democratic values, have always been co-produced, appropriated, and negotiated by actors from the peripheries, rather than monopolized by the center. By reading the celebratory discourse on the ceremony situationally, I attend to the ambiguities in how Chinese users employ civilizational and universalist vocabularies to contest locally hegemonic structures, which may simultaneously reproduce and challenge homonationalist logics and Eurocentric spatio-temporal hierarchies. Secondly, reactionary civilizationism in postcolonial settings, then, reacts not only to normative hierarchies that operate globally, but also specifically to the local appropriation of universalism, discrediting the latter as “Westernized anti-nationals,” or, in this case, “mentally colonized.” In this regard, the paper speaks to the growing scholarship on the co-opting of anti-colonial language for repressive and inequalitarian ends (Baron and Paradela-López 2022; Mihai and Ungureanu 2024; Shah 2024). Here, anti-colonial sensibilities are weaponized to target less the external other than the Chinese subjects as the internal other, whose identification with progressive values becomes framed as signifying subservience to “imperialism” and betrayal to the national body.

Lastly, situated within the emerging literature on convergence, entanglement, and productive incoherence in the global right (Abrahamsen et al. 2024; Roy 2024; Michelsen, De Orellana, and Buranelli 2025), the paper provides further insights into civilizational imaginaries and transversal alignment in digital reactionary discourse. By transversal alignment, I refer to the tactical, contingent, and context-

dependent convergence of narratives and affective structures across assumed geopolitical and ideological boundaries. Both the trope of “Western civilizational decay” and certain constructions of cultural affinities are instrumental to the articulation of queerphobic nationalism in Chinese cyberspace. However, civilizational signifiers such as “West” and “East” for the digital far right are not necessarily a tool for narrating cultural distinctiveness. Rather, they function more as mobile, adaptable transnational codes that animate different political affects, such as anxiety, envy, victimhood, and pride, in the global discursive economy of postliberal imagination. This allows for transversal alignment to emerge between geopolitically opposed actors and divergent ideological frameworks, where critique is repurposed for reactionary consolidation.

The paper is organized as follows. I start by elaborating on the co-production and negotiation of civilizational discourse in the Chinese context and beyond. After a brief introduction to the platforms and data, I provide a detailed analysis of competing narratives of civilization as articulated through polarized representations of the Paris Olympic opening ceremony on Chinese social media.

The Co-Production of Civilizational Discourse from the Peripheries

Scholarship on the concept of civilization commonly distinguishes between its double meaning as civilization in the singular (CiS)—as an ideal in opposition to the uncivilized or barbaric, and CiP, referring to supposedly discrete and internally coherent geo-cultural blocs. However, as Bowden notes (2009, 25), the two aspects are closely interlinked, and its function as a “descriptive term” to name certain geographies “civilizations” cannot be separated from its evaluative function that distinguishes between the civilized and the barbaric. Recent discussions of the revival of civilizational discourse have highlighted its “counter-hegemonic” character as a counterreaction to the liberal “standards of civilization” embedded within the post-Cold War international order (Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023; Özoflu and Gerim 2025). However, it is important to note from the outset that reactive civilizationism, which claims to reject liberal universalism, also consolidates hegemonic power structures both domestically and globally.

First, while CiP narratives are used by the European far right (Crone 2021) and postcolonial states to *claim* difference at the international level, they function to *suppress* (cultural and/or political) differences domestically, legitimating various projects of majoritarian ethnonationalism, authoritarianism, and social conservatism. In equating, for example, feminism, queer rights, or democracy with Westernness as a way of denunciation, they reproduce the hierarchical and essentialist logics of liberal “standards of civilization” while flipping the parameters of moral judgment (Zhang 2023). Secondly, civilizational discourse, when employed by states that present themselves as spokespersons of civilizations, naturalizes hierarchies between center and peripheries *within* regional imperial formations. As CiS entails a distinction between the civilized and the less so, territorial claims and sub-imperial ambitions of the center can be justified through supposed “cultural and historical affinity” (Pizzolo 2023, 292), which is itself a product of hierarchical power relations and colonial violence. Thirdly, the rejection of universalism in the state civilizationism of emerging powers is selective and partial. While certain values are rejected through an appeal to authenticity (“not

ours”) and/or sovereignty (“an instrument of cultural imperialism”), the universalism of market logics, capitalist development, and neoliberal globalization is not questioned, but rather remains integral to these ideological projects (Wilson 2024).

Drawing on the postcolonial approach to the co-constitution of the international (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bilgin 2021), I argue that the “standards of civilization” should not be understood as merely an invention of the center and imposed on the peripheries of the global social order. Rather, we should pay attention to how these “standards” are co-produced, appropriated, and negotiated by actors in the Global South and East within entangled local and global power structures. Regarding the “civilizationist logics” (Rao 2024, 81) of liberal human rights politics, for example, concepts such as homonationalism and homocolonialism have been developed to capture how a set of values has become the yardstick for rendering certain nations and subjectivities less civilized or backward, justifying exclusion and violence (Puar 2013; Rahman 2014). However, human rights activists in the postcolonial world also strategically produce and mobilize civilizational imaginaries of spatio-temporal hierarchies to advocate for greater freedom and equality (Rao 2020; Sloomaeckers and Bosia 2023). In the Chinese context, Zhang (2015) uses the concept of “queer Occidentalism” to refer to how queer writers and activists in China appropriate the idea of “the West” as “a liberating force.” In a more recent study, Liu (2024, 1) examines the reproduction of “homonationalist binary” and the developmentalist narrative of catching up with “the purportedly already modernized West” in counter-homophobic discourse on social media. A critical analysis of this could recognize local agency and appreciate its disruptive potentials in the domestic discursive context without minimizing the limitations in reproducing developmentalist binaries.

Both progressive and conservative narratives of civilization from the peripheries, then, are not simply reacting to (by either rejecting or embracing) already-made “standards of civilization” as a finished or fixed project, but rather active participants in their negotiations and re-articulations. It follows that reactionary civilizationisms in different localities are best understood in co-constitutive terms, rather than a series of parallel national projects. It is telling here to look at how the trope of the “civilizational decay” of “the West” operates in reactionary discourse both from within and from without. As Stübner argues (2021, 1), the idea of Western civilizational decline works as “a metapolitical far-right strategy” and “facilitates transnational ideological transfer” across Europe, North America, and Australia. However, this imaginary is also indispensable to anti-gender and queerphobic discourse formations elsewhere as a constitutive other. In some aspects, this is reminiscent of conservative CiP narratives in inter-war East Asia, which advocated for defending the spirituality of “Eastern civilization” against “Western materialist decadence” (Tsui 2018, 18). In contemporary Chinese nationalism, unlike previous research has suggested (Bettiza, Bolton, Lewis 2021), the operative “crisis narrative” is not so much about a “crisis of Chinese civilization” than the crisis and decline of “Western civilization.” In contrast to cultural conservatives of the 1930s, for technonationalists today, the superiority of the self is not located in “Eastern spirituality,” but in technology, industrial power, and a resistance to the “woke” cultures considered to be at the roots of the other’s decline (Zhang 2024). Meanwhile, Western postliberal thinkers increasingly reimagine places in the South and East as models of authoritarian efficiency, racial purity, and technocratic competence.

In the following, I would like to illustrate these points further through a brief review of the negotiation of meanings of civilization, or *wenming* 文明, in the Chinese context. As part of the “conceptual universalization in the transnational nineteenth century” (Hill 2013, 134), civilization as a modern concept became known as *wenming* in China via the Japanese term *bunmei*, especially through Fukuzawa Yukichi’s seminal book *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Influenced by Fukuzawa and the “standards of civilization” in nineteenth-century international law, reformist intellectuals in China at the turn of the twentieth century appropriated the Eurocentric theory that divides humanity into the civilized, the savage, and the semi-civilized to urge their fellow nationals to pursue a civilized state of being (Liang 1989 [1899]). The idealization of “Western civilization” as the model of emulation culminated in the New Culture movement and the May Fourth movement in the 1910s and the 1920s, which saw a proliferation of dichotomous civilizational comparisons. Leading “Westernizers” such as Chen Duxiu (1985 [1915]), who would later become a co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, characterized “Eastern civilizations” (such as China and India) as family centric, hierarchical, emotional, and relegated to the past, while “Western civilization” as modern civilization being defined by individualism, equality, freedom, and the rule of law.

The “May Fourth Occidentalism” (Shih 2001), which produced hierarchical differences between “China” and “the West” to advocate individual and national liberation, was followed by backlashes from conservative civilizationists. As mentioned earlier, the “conservative revolution” of the ruling Nationalist Party (the GMD) in the 1930s sought to cultivate and revive “Eastern civilizational ideals” and “national essence” against both Western imperialism and the May Fourth movement’s attack on “tradition.” Not unlike postcolonial authoritarianism today, while claiming to reject “Western” materialism and other “ostensibly Western things like autonomous labour unions, unfettered media, and individual rights” (Clinton 2017, 198), the GMD conservatives embraced capitalist development, state-led industrialization, and militaristic culture, which were not labeled Western, but considered necessary measures toward China’s national rejuvenation (Tsui 2018).

After winning the civil war, the Communist Party’s rule in China in the first few decades continued the iconoclastic trajectory. Under the dominance of revolutionary ideologies, both the concept of the “Chinese nation” (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族)¹ and culturalist articulations of “Chinese civilization” (*zhonghua wenming* 中华文明) were marginalized in political discourse. As they re-emerged in the post-reform era, the intellectual landscape of the 1980s was largely shaped by a May-Fourth-style Occidentalism and self-Orientalism that, once again, saw “the West” as the civilizational ideal for China’s political liberalization and socio-economic development (Chen 1995; Lin 2021). Xi Jinping’s ascendance to power in the 2010s consolidated the sidelining of liberal-leaning voices in public discourse, which once enjoyed considerable influence among the intelligentsia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Xi claimed in 2022 that under his presidency, “comprehensive and fundamental changes” in the ideological realm had taken place in the prior decade (Qiushi 2022). Part of this change has been the resurgence of ethno-civilizational discourse: the re-centering of

zhonghua minzu and *zhonghua wenming* as key concepts in Chinese nationalism and regime legitimation.

Introduced in 2017 at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, “forging a strong communal consciousness of the Chinese nation” (铸牢中华民族共同体意识) has become defined as the guiding principle of China’s ethnic policies. According to Xi’s and other party theoreticians’ reworking of ethno-civilizationism, *zhonghua minzu* is the creator of *zhonghua* civilization, and *zhonghua* civilization, characterized by its “continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, and peacefulness,” shapes the “inseparable community” of *zhonghua minzu* (State Ethnic Affairs Commission 2024). At the international level, Xi has emphasized the “diversity” (*duoyangxing* 多样性) of the world’s civilizations through the “Global Civilization Initiative,” warning against “imposing one’s values and models onto others” and “ideological rivalry” (Xi 2023). Thus domestically, the revival of ethno-civilizational discourse serves to legitimate the “remolding” of “non-Han minorities in the culture, behaviour, and linguistic norms of the Han majority” (Leibold and Chen 2024, 7) and suppress articulations of difference from minoritized groups, whereas permissible forms of representing ethnic difference are heritagized, “Disneyficated,” and depoliticized (Anonymous 2021). Internationally, civilizational discourse becomes a vehicle for *claiming* difference, posed as resistance to the dominance of liberal democratic values.

When we look at how different actors negotiate and mobilize meanings of civilization for different purposes, it becomes clear that authoritarian and conservative articulations of civilization are not only reacting to “international” or “Western” norms, the formation of which is entirely external to China. Rather, they are also a counterreaction to Chinese discourses that have reproduced and appropriated “standards of civilization” to formulate self-critique and aspirations. As the following pages will show, the backlash against the Paris Olympic opening ceremony among Chinese conservative nationalists is targeted at progressive internet users within China, seen as “mentally colonized,” far more vehemently than at the alleged “Western cultural hegemony.”

On Platforms, Data, and Method

In the first few hours of broadcasting, the Paris Olympic opening ceremony was highly acclaimed in Chinese cyberspace. The hashtag #The Paris Olympics are truly amazing# (#巴黎奥运会 真的牛#) topped the trending topic ranking on Weibo, and in the first 24 h, the ceremony received an average score of 9.0 out of 10 on the cultural reviewing site Douban. However, the backlash would soon follow, especially after the video of the ceremony was temporarily removed from the Olympic Games’ official YouTube channel. As of writing, the Douban score has dropped to 6.3.² To scrutinize drastically different representations of the ceremony across different online communities, I draw on data from multiple platforms, including Douban, Zhihu, and Weibo.

Started as a book and film reviewing site, Douban is an interest-based social networking service popular among the culturally engaged public. Despite being a relatively niche platform, Douban remains a go-to site for investigating user-generated cultural commentaries (Lau 2024), where debates on feminism, gender, and fandom culture are partic-

¹ *Minzu* is an ambiguous term that blurs the boundaries between race, ethnicity, and nation. Leibold and Chen (2024) propose to translate *Zhonghua minzu* as “Zhonghua race-nation.”

² Douban treats the opening ceremony as a cultural production and allows users to score it.

ularly influential. Zhihu is China's largest social networking platform based on community question-and-answering, popular especially among urban professionals with an interest in technological expertise. Previous research has noted the influence of right-wing populist, misogynistic, and anti-feminist narratives in this community (Bao 2024), even though a diverse range of political views can certainly be found on the platform. The microblogging site Weibo is one of China's best known and most studied social media platforms. Among other things, it plays a critical role in digital protests and Chinese digital feminism (Xue and Rose 2022) despite stringent censorship and the rise of ultranationalist and anti-feminist influencers. The user bases of these platforms are skewed toward China's most developed urban regions. Market research companies estimate that 66.36 percent of Douban users (Leida Finance 2022), 73.8 percent of Zhihu users (TF Securities 2021), and 55.9 percent of Weibo users (QuestMobile 2024) reside in first- and second-tier cities.³ Digital narratives on these sites are disproportionately shaped by the perspectives of a younger, well-educated urban demographic.

My purpose here is to examine contrasting narratives of civilization formulated through celebratory or vilifying representations of the ceremony, rather than exploring the differences between platforms themselves. For this reason, I have chosen to sample 218 positive reviews on Douban,⁴ which is most representative of the celebratory discourse, and 1,904 posts from two Zhihu question threads: "How to view the Paris Olympics opening ceremony?" and "It looks like the Olympics official channel deleted the video of the opening ceremony. What's happening? Why?"⁵ Of these, we coded 1,716 answers as negative, 64 positive, and 124 unknown or neutral. My analysis of the deprecatory discourse draws on both negative and neutral comments, while the positive comments on Zhihu largely reflect themes already captured in Douban reviews. However, I also highlight a counter-narrative within the Zhihu data that is absent from the Douban celebratory discourse, which pushes back against the *zhiren* label and challenges both homonationalist and postcolonial conservative logics. These are further complemented by selected Weibo posts. It is worth noting that both progressive and conservative narratives are present on all these platforms, albeit with differing degrees of visibility and prominence. The posts I have collected and examined were published between July 26, 2024 and September 4, 2024, although the vast majority, especially the influential ones (with high engagement rates), were published within the first few days after the event.

All three platforms feature the "upvote" or "like" functionality that increases the visibility of more "liked" or "upvoted" content, which is understood here as a social media affordance constitutive of the material-discursive practice in digital space (Bucher and Helmond 2018). As a design element, the upvote/like function creates a feedback loop that amplifies the dominant discourse aligned with the "commu-

nity sentiments" and renders dissenting voices less visible (Schneider 2021). Bearing this in mind, I should note that my access to Douban reviews is limited by the website design, which only displays the reviews that have been voted by platform users as most "useful." The analysis presented below therefore is focused on the dominant discourse within these specific communities, constituted through the socio-technical mechanisms described above. My citation of engagement numbers should be read as an indicator of the *within-platform* influence of a particular speech, shaped by the interplay between technological affordances and social practices.

In line with established ethical guidelines for internet research (Townsend and Wallace 2017), I have taken a context-sensitive approach to data collection and presentation. Users of Douban engage in film reviewing with the reasonable expectation of public visibility, as these reviews are published openly, indexed by search engines, and often intended to reach wide audiences. For Zhihu threads on the Olympic opening ceremony, a widely broadcast and high-profile event, it is also reasonable to assume that the discussion is of public character. While I do use direct quotes for analysis and illustration, they have been translated from the original, which makes reverse identification highly unlikely. However, I provide source links for content produced by influencers with over 500,000 followers, who are considered public figures in China's digital economy, as such accounts are typically required to verify and display identity information on major platforms. This differentiated and context-sensitive approach aims to balance transparency with respect for privacy and anonymity.

The analysis is informed by the discourse-historical approach (DHA; Reisigl 2017) and the feminist approach (Lazar 2007) to critical discourse studies (CDS). As a first step, I read through the posts and identified key themes or clusters of meanings emerging from the data. Representative examples for each theme were then selected for iterative, close reading, guided by DHA's emphasis on the "broader sociopolitical and historical context" and the "institutional frames of a specific context of situation" (Reisigl 2017, 53). For instance, in examining favorable representations of the performance, I consider how the involvement of state media shapes the affective-discursive dynamics while situating the reproduction of spatio-temporal hierarchy within the broader lineage of Occidentalism in Chinese intellectual history. In analyzing narratives of civilizational decay and authenticity, I attend to the "gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations" (Lazar 2007, 142) discursively produced through binary imaginaries of order/disorder, normality/abnormality, and civilized/uncivilized. Consistent with CDS's interest in identities and ideology, the analysis also explores the articulation of multifaceted relationships between self and other, alongside the construction of internal others. Where appropriate, word frequency analysis is integrated as a critical heuristic to highlight recurring signifiers and lexical patterns (e.g., the use of "demon"-related metaphors, the absence or presence of "the West") rather than as a statistical exercise. These quantitative cues are used to inform and deepen interpretive readings, not to substitute for them.

Civilization-in-the-Singular, Progress, and Hierarchical Difference

Supporters of the opening ceremony interpret the performance as a celebration of the values they identify with, an

³City tiers in China are an unofficial ranking system based on indicators of socioeconomic development. It is now a ubiquitous reference in market research and a centerpiece in the public imagination of urban hierarchies.

⁴The Douban page of the ceremony shows that there are 31,846 short reviews (duanping 短评). However, only 400 of them are displayed and can be collected through the web page, which are the most upvoted reviews. Of these, 218 are positive (4 or 5 stars), 25 neutral (3 stars), and 155 negative (1 or 2 stars). Sentiments expressed in negative Douban reviews are largely reflected in the Zhihu discussion. However, one theme in negative reviews on Douban is not observed in the Zhihu threads. This is a trans-exclusive feminist view arguing that the emphasis on LGBTQ and gender nonconforming visibility is detrimental to women's rights.

⁵These are found here: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/524201854>; <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662783536>.



Figure 1. Original and translated word cloud charts based on word frequency in Douban positive reviews, generated with weiciyun. “Olympic Games” and “opening ceremony” are excluded.

embodiment of universal progress or CiS ideals, and offering an alternative imagination to the heteropatriarchal norms they see dominate in Chinese society and elsewhere. As [figure 1](#) shows, “freedom,” “women,” “love,” “equality,” “inclusion” or “tolerance” (*baorong* 包容), and “humankind” are among the most frequently occurring words in positive reviews of the ceremony on Douban. These emotionally charged comments, which often mention that the viewers are moved into tears, read the performance not only through the lens of universal values, feminism, and LGBTQ empowerment,⁶ but also through the framework of civilizational progress for humankind:

Step out of the stadium; deconstruct masculinity (*yanggang* 阳刚). The festival belongs to the city; the city belongs the people. (4,835 upvotes, 27-7-2024, the most upvoted positive review displayed atop)

Thank you, France, for making me think that humanity is still salvable' (2,683 upvotes, 27-7-2024)

I am fortunate to witness a more progressive moment in the history of human civilization. (119 upvotes, 27-7-2024)

Commentators contextualize their feelings of joy and inspiration by referring to the global rise of conservative movements and the dominance of nationalist “grand narratives” (*hongda xushi* 宏大叙事) in Chinese political culture, suggesting that the performance offers a rare glimpse of hope and a non-nationalist, non-masculinist framework of public feelings oriented toward the human individual and the oft-cited values of “freedom,” “equality,” and “inclusion.” Some Douban users interpret the ceremony as a strategic countermove against the right-wing rhetoric about social justice movements “going too far.” For example, one comment argues that in the context of feminism and queer liberation being an ongoing struggle, the point is to “make the minority the mainstream and let the invisible become visible” in a “media event participated and live broadcast by the whole world,” and “to shock the heteronormative soci-

ety a little bit" (27-7-2024). Some express joy in seeing how "cis straight" (*shunzhi* 顺直) conservatives in the world and "pinks" (slang term for pro-regime nationalists) in their social media feed are upset by the show. One of the viral Weibo posts, which amassed 138 thousand likes and 22 thousand reposts within a few days, is from an influencer who was awarded "Weibo knowledge blogger (*xinshi bozhu* 新知博主, online opinion leaders) of the year" in 2024. They contend that the reinterpretation of "freedom, equality, and fraternity" is not outdated, but rather much needed, in a time marked by post-pandemic pessimism and the global turn to the right.⁷ Among the top reposts, another opinion leader and writer comments that the performance is moving because it "respects humans, praises humans, tolerates the diversity and imperfections of humans; rather than constructing and praising a fiction placed above all humans,"⁸ which might be interpreted as the fiction of the nation-state.

There is therefore an explicit or implicit comparison between the humanism and free-spiritedness viewers see in the Paris event and the preference for order and “grand narratives” they consider to be characteristic of China’s political culture. One Douban user is encouraged by how youngsters today might be inspired, adding that “if I saw this as a teenager, then it wouldn’t have to take ten years for me” to get to know the “territory beyond heteronormativity, masculinity, and grand narratives” (27-7-2024). Another reports that they feel something they “have never felt since coming back to China” because of the absence of “grand narratives” and “collectivism” in the spectacle. Several Weibo comments contrast more explicitly the Paris opening ceremony with the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony in 2008, suggesting that “we are obsessed with unified moves and grand narratives” or that “the human becomes a cog in a gigantic and synchronized machine” in the story about “national power and the superiority of the regime” (29-7-2024). However, other comments engage in a more nuanced reflection on these binaries. A Douban user reflects that “collectivism and grand narratives often give one a sense of security, but it’s also difficult not to aspire for freedom” (29-7-2024).⁹ There

⁶Some comments formulate a more explicit critique of heteropatriarchy, whereas others speak of gender equality and queer inclusion as universal values within more of a liberal framework. While discernible, the difference between the more radical and the more liberal-leaning positions is not a crucial division in this particular discussion. However, it is worth noting that what are known as liberals (*zìyóupài* 自由派) in China, or those critical of the regime, are not necessarily culturally progressive. The debate over Trumpism among Chinese liberals has made it clear that many are deeply hostile to social justice movements (Lin 2021).

⁷Available at <https://m.weibo.cn/status/5060627565379718>, July 26, 2024.

⁸Available at <https://weibo.com/1686709997/Opspk8scV>, July 27, 2024.

⁹In all these utterances the phrase “grand narrative” or *hongda xushi* seems to be used as a substitute for state-centric or nationalist narratives, whereas analytically speaking, the celebration of the spectacle as an encapsulation of “progress in human civilization” is also a form of “grand narrative.”

are also users who express appreciation for *both* the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony and the Paris one.

An additional context for social media users' romanticization of the Paris event is the fact that it was aired on China Central Television (CCTV). Reporting directly to the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, CCTV is a key player in the Chinese state's propaganda apparatus and rarely highlights feminist or LGBTQ-related topics. When reviewing the Oscar-winning film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, another state news agency, People's Daily, referred to the lesbian character Jobu Tupaki as a "daughter who lives a Westernized life" (生活西化的女儿) instead of acknowledging her sexual identity. The framing is typical of the othering technology in postcolonial nationalism that constructs non-normative sexuality as "Western." As the phrase went viral online, members of queer communities in China then reclaimed it to assert their identity and turn state media's effort to invisibilize sexuality politics on its head (Sun 2024). It is precisely because state media has long established itself as a mouthpiece of heteropatriarchal nationalism that viewers see a particularly empowering, subversive, and joyful moment when the performance had to be live broadcast on CCTV. On Weibo, the hashtag #CCTV commentators fell silent# (#央视解说沉默了#) briefly became the most trending topic before it was censored. Members of the digital public attuned to feminist and queer solidarity take the opportunity to enjoy the imagined embarrassment of state media commentators, note how CCTV usually imposes strict censorship on its content, and celebrate this as a day when "our sister CCTV becomes Westernized," referring to the phrase introduced above (Hedwig 2024). For those who have been marginalized by the hegemonic discourse of authoritarian, heteronormative, and gendered nationalism in contemporary China, the airing of the performance on a media platform that plays a central part in enabling their marginalization could feel like a moment of victory, even if they are well aware of its ephemeral and illusionary nature.

Needless to say, the idealization of France and the Olympic event as an epitome of "progress," "freedom," and "love" is detached from the reality of gender and sexuality politics in France and the Olympic Games. Not unlike the May Fourth Occidentalists mentioned earlier, many (but not all) of the Douban and Weibo comments examined here project their ideals of freedom, equality, and liberation onto a romanticized other, France, producing a narrative almost reminiscent of Chen Duxiu's "France and modern civilization," a foundational text in the New Culture Movement. In the political context of the 2020s, France is reimagined as a champion for gender equality and queer inclusion, a beacon of hope when "the whole world is turning right" (Douban 27-7-2024), and staying true to its revolutionary legacy as netizens refer to the country as the birthplace of human rights. Even considering the opening ceremony itself, this singular representation conveniently neglects the Algerian delegation's commemoration of the protestors against French colonial rule, who were killed by Paris police in 1961. As the various posts cited above show, it inevitably involves reproducing the familiar set of spatio-temporal hierarchies between the other and the self in Chinese intellectual discourse: the advanced and the lagged behind; free-spiritedness and collectivism; but also the ability to speak in universals and the inability to do so.

In their positive reviews, Douban users speak of how "France's sense of freedom and romanticism is ahead of the world by at least 50 years" (28-7-2024) and the "gap" (*chaju* 差距) between us and them cannot be bridged sim-

ply through "economic growth or the passage of time" (27-7-2024). A user jokingly suggests that whereas other Olympic opening ceremonies are about the display of "national power," the Paris one is about "fixing the image of human civilization" (28-7-2024). In rejecting dominant nationalist narratives in China, these comments end up embracing a form of French exceptionalism characterized by the paradox between an identification with universalism and the emphasis on French particularities. Weibo responses to the aforementioned influencer's viral post argue that the show is not about the awesomeness of France, but the awesomeness of women, the arts, and humankind (27-2-2024). Another goes further to suggest that "this is the biggest difference between civilization and culture. . . when we aim at being faster, higher, and stronger,¹⁰ Paris shows us being freer, more equal, more humane, and more civilized" (28-7-2024). This thread of comparison, which implies that while China could only showcase its particularistic national culture and material achievements, France is able to showcase universal civilization and pursues something higher, is also contested among the generally favorable viewers. More cautious users suggest that the Beijing Olympics was in a different historical period when the display of national power was needed; or that "it takes time to make civilizational progress (*wenming jinbu* 文明进步, 27-7-2024)."¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the language of civilization and the imaginary of global spatio-temporal hierarchies—between those seen as further ahead in the linear trajectory of progress and those who are "not there yet"—are commonly seen in human rights advocacy in postcolonial spaces, which I conceptualize as the co-production and appropriation of civilizational standards. The strategy of romanticizing the other and essentializing difference, even for progressive goals, is not without limitations. It misses the opportunity to recognize the experiences of marginalized and racialized groups in France, implicitly reinforcing the "civilizationist logics of homonationalism" (Rao 2024, 81), which in the global context are complicit in legitimating imperial violence. The theme of universality and particularism resonates with the perennial Eurocentric motif that only Europeans speak for universal civilization, and non-Europeans speak on behalf of their particularistic cultures, even though it is presented as a critique of domestically hegemonic statist narratives and an expression of aspiration for a freer and more just society. As to be shown below, conservative nationalists exploit these limitations, while also wilfully distorting them, to label those who appreciate the ceremony as *zhiren* or "mentally colonized."

That said, I would like to emphasize that it is about who mobilizes a discourse and for what purpose. Although some—not all—aspects of the celebratory discourse involve an essentialist representation of France that resembles femonationalist and homonationalist logics, the politics these members of the digital public seek to advocate for through this portrayal is fundamentally different from, say, how the European far right mobilizes femonationalism and homonationalism. For the latter, gender equality and

¹⁰The motto was proposed by Pierre de Coubertin and first used at the Paris Olympic Games in 1924.

¹¹The co-creator of the Paris opening ceremony Patrick Boucheron made similar comparisons between Beijing 2008 and Paris 2024. In an interview, he underscored that "we're not in Beijing in 2008," where the opening ceremony "seemed like a demonstration of power," and "this is France" (*Groupe d'études géopolitiques* 2024). On the surface, the comparison is remarkably similar to Weibo and Douban comments. However, for Boucheron, China seems a nationalist/authoritarian other against which France's unique identity can be asserted. Chinese viewers engage in this comparison for self-critique.

queer liberation are construed as markers of difference to exclude and securitize the ethno-cultural other (Farris 2017; Mondon and Winter 2020). The former operates in a different political context, where the political establishment is far from co-opting social justice movements, but rather sees feminism and sexual politics as “Western” values unsuitable for Chinese society and a threat to regime security. It is within this context that the transnational reading of the opening ceremony, aired on state television, could generate unexpected affects of joy and empowerment that may not have been conceivable in the original place of production.

Imagining Civilizational Decay and Authenticity

As introduced earlier, the vast majority (90 percent) of the Zhihu answers examined here represent the spectacle negatively. Contrary to the theme of civilizational progress discussed above, here the opening ceremony is depicted as an embodiment of moral decay and civilizational decline through misogynistic, homophobic, and dehumanizing languages, a trope observers of the digital far right have been well acquainted with. At the corpus level, we notice that whereas the signifier *xifang* 西方 or “the West” is rarely used in the celebratory discourse, it is nonetheless a top word in the deprecatory discourse (fig. 2).¹² In other words, while the celebration of the performance on Douban produces and invokes a romanticized image of France vis-à-vis the world’s conservatives, the central referent object in the representational politics on Zhihu is not only France, but also “the West” or “Western civilization,” which is portrayed as morally decadent and ideologically problematic.

Another distinct feature of the Zhihu corpus data, as figure 2 shows, is the overrepresentation of the acronym LGBT. Although positive reviews on Douban do mention the identity label as well, the issue is less central to the overall narrative of progress, which is generally framed through an affirmation of universal values, than how queerphobia is at the very heart of the Zhihu narrative of civilizational decay. Thus, unsurprisingly, the Zhihu discussion incorporates the usual set of homophobic, anti-feminist, and racist narratives characteristic of the digital far right into the imagination of the Paris opening ceremony as something that spells out the “collapse of Western civilization” (20-8-2024) through unmistakably dehumanizing languages. Users, for example, compare the performers to “demons” and “monsters” by employing four-character idioms such as *yaomoguiguai* 妖魔鬼怪 (demons, ghosts, and monsters) and *qunmolanwu* 群魔乱舞 (a horde of demons dancing widely), both of which occur more than sixty times in the corpus. Two opinion leaders with over 500,000 and 1.5 million followers, respectively, describe the performance as a “world of animals” (28-7-2024, 6,987 upvotes) and “the dancing of apes” (28-7-2024, 2,217 upvotes).¹³ While the blatant dehumanization of gender non-conforming performers is often accompanied with the statement that “I don’t hate LGBT people,” some of the most highly engaged posts also make it abundantly clear that “this opening ceremony has made me even more firmly believe that I oppose any forms of LGBT in China” (28-7-2024, 6,797 upvotes). Others draw historical analogies with reference to both the Roman Empire and China’s own imperial history, a narrative trope frequently observed in the digital far right’s abuse of history:

It clearly shows that white nations now are like the final years of the Roman Empire, when moral decay was rampant, with widespread sexual immorality, including homosexuality among both men and women. The influx of foreign race (*yizu* 异族) immigrants encroached on the living space of the native population. This is a repetition of such historical patterns. (27-7-2024, 4,824 upvotes)

Referring to the downfall of the Western Jin Dynasty and Confucian classics, another post similarly associates the alleged erosion of gender norms with disorder and civilizational decline by arguing that the “chaotic era” is characterized by “men dressing like women.” It further equates “Western feminism and LGBT” to women and eunuchs’ interference in politics in ancient China, which the user deems a sign of the collapse of a nation (28-7-2024, 2,568 upvotes).

While race is less pronounced than that of gender and sexuality in the discussion, racism and antisemitism are at times brought in in the style of what might be called “right-wing intersectionality” (Ravecca et al. 2023), or the simultaneous attack on different areas of progressive politics regarded as a unified enemy. The employment of rhetorical devices like *baizuo*¹⁴ and political correctness helps users to shift between different issue areas and establish equivalence between them. The spectacle then is described as an “extremist *baizuo* party” dictated by the culture of political correctness that seeks to “please” LGBT groups, Black people, feminists, and disabled people (28-7-2024). The more explicitly racist posts claim that most of the performers are Black people rather than “racially pure” Frenchmen (29-7-2024) or reiterate versions of the Great Replacement theory that assert that France has been “Blackened” and “Islamized.” In short, the central thread in the Zhihu discourse is a familiar kind of reactionary imagination of “the West”: a story of decadence, decline, and collapse interwoven with queerphobic, masculinist, and racist narratives. Predictably then, the hierarchical civilizational imaginary in Douban positive reviews is completely reversed: it is China now that is responsible for “passing on the torch of human civilization” (28-7-2024, 1,784 upvotes).

However, beyond this central thread, two other seemingly contradictory themes emerge in the Zhihu discussion: the appreciation of and solidarity with “proper European civilization”; and the framing of China as more secular, more tolerant than the “religious West.” Russia plays a key role in the first theme. Very much in agreement with the Russian state’s official narrative under Putin, one of the most highly voted answers maintains that “the meaning of Russia’s existence is to keep a backup for classical European civilization” (29-7-2024, 9,464 upvotes). Citing the backlash elsewhere, an influencer observes that not only “our Eastern civilization can’t accept this, proper (*zhengtong* 正统) Western civilization also can’t accept it” (28-7-2024, 6,983 upvotes).¹⁵ Indeed, others point to commonalities between “Western” and “Chinese cultures,” arguing that both traditions value similar moral obligations and that Chinese modernization is based on “absorbing Western science and culture” (20-8-2024). Commentors making this argument thus both reproduce essentialist ideas of discrete civilizations and emphasize the connections between them in order to cast what is labeled as postmodern cultures as a common threat to the tenants of modernity, such as “science” and “reason,” in both

¹²Only 2 out of the 218 positive reviews on Douban mention “the West.” By contrast, 243 out of 1,904 Zhihu answers mention it.

¹³Available at <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662677164/answer/3576169788>; <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662783536/answer/3576606494>.

¹⁴Literally translated as “white left,” *baizuo* is an internet neologism that functions similarly as “woke” in the Anglophone context (Zhang 2024).

¹⁵Available at <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662677164/answer/3576169788>.



Ironically, while much of the Zhihu discussion shows an undisguised and unapologetic disdain for the language of diversity and inclusion, it at the same time produces an image of China as more secular and tolerant than Europe and North America, with the religiosity of the latter being underlined. This narrative became particularly pronounced after the official YouTube account of the Olympic Games temporarily removed the opening ceremony video. A widely circulated claim on Chinese social media was that the removal resulted from political pressure, and that other national broadcasters had censored parts of spectacle. Most responses coded as “neutral” (as they only comment on the broadcasting, not the ceremony itself), and many of those coded as “negative” emphasize that CCTV was the only broadcaster to air the show in full, portraying it as a true champion of tolerance and free speech. Unlike the moral alarmist posts speaking of the collapse of civilization or extinction of humanity under postmodernism, the discussion comparing Chinese to “Western” reactions performs a set of “banal and ordinary” affects (Moerking and Baspehlivan 2025). Commenters suggest that while conservatives in Western countries are deeply offended or “triggered” (*pofang* 破防), the vast majority of Chinese people, being non-religious, are not “triggered,” but *simply* find the scenes ugly, disgusting, or “hurting the eyes” (28-7-2024, 10,706 upvotes). Rather than mobilizing intense emotions such as hatred or fear, these comments normalize a queerphobic affective landscape by framing their reaction as casual indifference or mere aesthetic disapproval. This simultaneously enables users to articulate difference between China and “the West.” It is argued that “the degree of cultural openness and tolerance in China is in fact higher than many American

Given that the accepted wisdom on Zhihu is that “the West” itself is also against the opening ceremony, the accusation of “political correctness” or “woke” cultures as an instrument of Western cultural imperialism, which is more frequently seen in other contexts (Zhang 2020), is less pronounced in this discussion. There are still examples that employ this topos. For instance, one answer suggests that the show is further proof that “Western society is taking every opportunity to propagate their political correctness” to “win over people who are mentally immature” (28-7-2024). Another contends that “the essence of diversity” is attempting to “maintain hegemony” while experiencing “declined national power and technological stagnation” (28-7-2024). However, as the following section will show, the accusation of “coloniality” is targeted at the internal other—those who are oriented toward feminist and queer solidarity and critical of nationalism—more vigorously than the external other.

The reactionary narrative of moral decay and civilizational decline is a tired one. In the Zhihu discussion of the Olympic opening ceremony, the vilification of the internal other takes as much priority, if not more, as recycling the usual talking points about Western decadence and decline. In other words, much of the attack is directed at Chinese viewers who celebrate the ceremony, aided by the accusation of coloniality and a wilful blanket generalization of global reactions to the show. A total of 131 answers in the two question threads invoke the label *zhiren* 殖人 or its derivative synonyms to discredit sympathetic viewers, painting a picture that *the whole world* is disgusted and offended by the show, whereas only the *zhiren* in China sing its praises. *Zhiren* is an online political slur that has been popularized among nationalist influencers since 2021. A compound word con-

sisting of *zhi*—colonial or colonized—and *ren*—person, the term is used by social media users to label fellow nationals whom they consider to be “foreign worshipping” and “China-hating.” While slang terms with similar connotations have always existed in Chinese political culture, such as *yangnu* 洋奴 (foreign lackey) and *hanjian* 汉奸 (traitor to the nation and the Han race), the explicit invocation of the “colonial” in the rise of *zhiren* as a new political slur for policing the moral boundary of the nation reflects a more recent consciousness among the internationally minded digital public to instrumentalize the anti-colonial language.

As discussed earlier, some of the favorable reviews on Douban and Weibo do involve a romanticization of France and criticisms of Chinese political culture. The *zhiren* accusation exploits this tendency, exaggerates or distorts the criticism while at the same time siding with global conservative forces. This ridiculing of sympathetic viewers is particularly invigorated by the fact that the video was temporarily removed from the Olympic Games’ YouTube channel, leading to the widespread use of the “boomerang” metaphor in the disparaging discourse. The thrust of this narrative is that whereas the *zhiren* claim that France is “inclusive, advanced, and civilized,” and China is “non-inclusive, uncivilized, and all about grand narratives,” it turns out that the video of the opening ceremony is now being censored abroad, not in China (28-7-2024). One poster claims that the *zhiren* consider Chinese people “unable to understand France’s progress and civilization,” before arguing that the world is now waking up to “the tyranny of the rainbow religion” (a slang term to mock LGBTQ movements), while only the “self-loathing” Chinese *zhiren* are still trying to “import ideologies” to China (29-7-2024, 1,691 upvotes). Another suggests that such “bootlicking” behavior is rooted in “self-colonization, self-slavery, and self-castration,” after demonizing gender non-conforming performers as a humiliation to the French nation and culture (28-7-2024, 1,424 upvotes). Some participants in the celebratory discourse refer to conservatives as “people from the Qing dynasty,” a strategy of temporal designation that relegates their opponents to a past and stigmatized historical period. In the Zhihu discussion, users reject the temporal stigmatization either through *reductio ad absurdum*—by suggesting that “the whole world live in the Qing dynasty,” or, by turning it on its head, arguing that it is the *zhiren* who live in the past when the Chinese believed that “foreign moon is rounder.”¹⁶

Several ironies lie in the ostensible rejection of “coloniality” in the labeling of sympathetic viewers as *zhiren* or a colonized person. First, while the backlash against the celebratory representation of the spectacle as an embodiment of universal progress captures to some degree the discontent with a hierarchical imagination of spatio-temporal difference, it does not engage in any actual critique of French colonialism beyond occasionally framing political correctness as a hegemonic ideology that “the West” seeks to impose on the world. Despite accusing those who admire the “France” they see in the opening ceremony of being mentally colonized, the posts quoted above *also* speak of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the great cultures of the French nation, without any reflection on the constitutive role of colonialism, only to dismiss the show as a betrayal to those admirable legacies. On the few occasions where French imperialism is mentioned, the anti-imperialist sentiment is interlaced with racist and Islamophobic state-

ments. The following quote is a representative example in this regard:

The entire event was filled with the self-righteousness and affectations of an old imperialist power. ... The era when imperialists could shove a bunch of flashy, incomprehensible nonsense down our throats and tell us it’s art is long gone. Imperial France has become Blackenized, Islamized, fecalized, and impoverished, yet it seized the opportunity of the Olympic opening ceremony to showcase a few bewildering performances, proclaiming: This is what democracy, freedom, inclusivity, and sophistication look like. (28-7-2024)

Other posts refer to the “Blackenization” and “Islamization” of France as a “bitter fruit” of French colonialism, as the perceived problems of demographic change and social disorder are thought to be caused by immigration from ex-colonies. While the comments are specifically concerned with the Olympic event here, they are reflective of broader trends in online speech where anti-imperialist rhetoric goes hand in hand with racism, Islamophobia, misogyny, and homophobia.

Secondly, the attack on favorable reviewers of the performance, many of whom identify with feminist and queer-inclusive values, as *zhiren* relies on an imagination of global conservative solidarity and, in fact, takes “Western” reactions as the yardstick to judge the legitimacy of Chinese viewers’ reading of the show. Exemplifying the transnational circulation and consolidation of the digital far right, Zhihu users reference X posts from Elon Musk and other figures to generate a framing that “Westerners” are also disgusted by the performance and that the *zhiren* in China are “abandoned” by their “masters.” A viral post from X user “DD Geopolitics,” which contrasts pictures from the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony with the Paris one with the caption “East vs West,” is referenced in eight Zhihu answers and circulated on other platforms as well (fig. 3). It is presented as evidence that the overwhelming majority of netizens on “Euro-American” (*oumei* 欧美) social media also prefer “East” to “West.” Here, we see a breakaway from the usual depiction of “the West” as pathologically biased against China in digital nationalism—conservative nationalists identify with their counterparts elsewhere, whom they present as “the whole world including the West,” to demonize the enemy within and the ideologies they are associated with. The internal other is ridiculed here with the presumption that “even their masters have surrendered and apologized, whereas only the *zhiren* are still preaching about diversity and inclusion” (28-7-2024, 2,217 upvotes). The attackers also use epithets like *tuzhi* 土殖 to make the point that the biggest problem with them is not *zhi* (colonial or colonized), but *tu* (native, rural), as they “can’t figure out what their foreign masters think.”¹⁷ Thus, despite the rhetoric against the colonial, what the invocation of the *zhiren* or *tuzhi* label does is denying agency and authenticity to Chinese feminists, queer activists, and critics of hegemonic nationalist narratives. They are reduced to the “puppets” of mythological “foreign masters,” and the legitimacy of their politics cannot be evaluated on its own without introducing external, “Western,” referents: it is *either* delegitimated as a tool of Western ideological influence *or* dismissed because it does not conform to the conservative “West” with which right-wing nationalists here identify.

¹⁶Available at <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662783536/answer/3576119094>.

¹⁷For a representative text from an influencer, see <https://www.zhihu.com/question/662783536/answer/3575911511>.



Figure 3. An image and a poll on X posted by “DD Geopolitics.” The results were subsequently circulated on Chinese social media and used as proof that the preference for “East” over “West” is a global consensus.

The backlash against both the event itself and favorable viewers in China exemplifies the transversality of contemporary far-right politics, where tactical, contingent, transactional alignments emerge across both geopolitical boundaries and ideological spectra. As Roy (2024, 4) puts it, far-right transversals are produced by the “largely unplanned assembly of diverse and contradictory political logics.” Across assumed geopolitical fault lines, right-wing nationalists in China align with the Western far right and underscore cultural affinities despite at the same time rejecting progressive values as “Western cultural hegemony.” Across the conventional parameters of ideological categorization, we also see statements that are usually associated with the left critique of imperialism being incorporated into scripts of racism, Islamophobia, misogyny, and queerphobia.

Of nearly 2,000 posts examined, only four push back against the application of the *zhiren* label to favorable view-

ers of the ceremony. One of them is worth quoting at length here:

Is there a possibility that we support the Paris opening ceremony not because it was created by Westerners, but because we support the values and political agenda reflected there themselves? ... Running to empathize with Christian conservatism, forming a united front with them across thousands of miles — who is the real *zhiren* here? They seem to hold the belief that progressivism is a Western patent, that Westerners have the exclusive privilege of being the most progressive, and that it is absolutely unacceptable for us to be more progressive or radical than the West. “How dare you be more progressive than Westerners?” exclaim Chinese conservatives. However, the legitimacy of progressivism does not come from Westernness... I will be happy to see that one day, the progressive agenda will be led by the East. (29-7-2024).

Despite still employing categories of “West” and “East,” the comment offers a rare counter-narrative in the online discussion that rejects both postcolonial conservatism and homonationalism, exposing the Eurocentrism operative in both discursive-ideological formations despite their opposing attitudes toward gender and sexual politics. The underlying assumption in both is that feminists and queer activists in China can only follow the route that has been set by “the most advanced parts of the world” (Rao 2020, 38). Homonationalism maps backwardness and advancedness onto established spatialities such as nations, civilizations, and cultures; postcolonial conservatism uses alleged foreignness to discredit domestic counterhegemonic movements as colonial, all while declaring solidarity with the transnational right. Rather than defined by any cultural essence, the “East” here is invoked as a sign for that which is construed as subordinate to destabilize the dominant imagination. I would also juxtapose the anonymous user’s comment with Žižek’s commentary on the opening ceremony. For him, it “did not merely present Europe at its best; it reminded the world that only in Europe is such a ceremony even possible.” He asserts that the “universal reason” shown in the performance offers “a rare glimpse of modern Europe’s emancipatory core” (Žižek 2024). While the event provides Žižek with another opportunity to assert his “leftist Eurocentrism” (1998), the Chinese netizen’s comment offers a vernacular formulation of what Sekyi-Otu (2018, 30) calls left universalism. Such an orientation takes universalism as a starting point to question unequal and unjust “conditions of existence” in historically particular time-spaces, and the very act of claiming the universal from the margins puts Eurocentric logics into question.

Conclusion

Attending to vernacular and competing narratives of civilization, examined here through contrasting representations of the Paris Olympic opening ceremony on Chinese social media, allows us to rethink assumptions about civilizationism as a counterreaction to external, fixed, and already-made “standards of civilization” invented by the center. Rather, I have argued that the meanings of civilizationist logics are negotiated and co-produced by actors in the Global South and East, who may draw on global and universalist vocabularies to contest locally hegemonic power structures. In the celebratory discourse on the Olympic ceremony, progressively inclined viewers use the language of civilizational progress, not without romanticizing the other and strate-

gically reproducing spatio-temporal hierarchies, to critique statist and masculinist cultures in their situated, lived realities. The fact that it was broadcast on Chinese state media, which is complicit in framing feminism and sexuality justice as “Western values” unsuitable and dangerous to Chinese society, helps generate unexpected subversive potentials in the transnational consumption of the media event. While some of the civilizational narratives may resemble homonationalist logics, they should be contextualized in the political circumstances in which they are situated, where progressive movements have been ostracized rather than co-opted by sovereignty.

Reactionary civilizationism, then, reacts not only to normative hierarchies that operate at the international level, but also to the local appropriation described above. The backlash offers rich insights into how civilizational imaginaries operate in the global and transversal politics of digital reactionary discourse. While conservative nationalists do mobilize CiP narratives to construct the image of Western “civilizational decay” and difference between “East” and “West,” their primary function is not to assert cultural distinctiveness, but rather to articulate a different CiS ideal based on order, tradition, and purity. While they appear to reject the liberal civilizational hierarchy, they embrace and produce another hierarchical binary between the racially pure (white), orderly, masculine, and the racialized, the “chaotic,” and the gender non-conforming. Rather than cultural uniqueness, what is at stake here is the supposed coherence and purity of any civilization as a bounded moral-aesthetic order.

It is here that conservative nationalists show a transversal solidarity with the Western far right in this global “culture war” moment, although, ironically, they also narrate a sense of superiority by casting the Chinese reaction as more secular and casual and the backlash from “Euro-America” more religious and committed. The accusation of coloniality is then turned inwards toward the enemy within. By labeling favorable viewers *zhiren*, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist impulses are weaponized by authoritarian nationalism to police the moral boundary of the nation and render difference as betrayal. As I have argued elsewhere (Altinors et al forthcoming), the label gains popularity among nationalist influencers by channeling the discontent with the tendency in the longer trajectory of Chinese intellectual history to reproduce narratives of civilizational hierarchy that frame China as “backward” or morally lacking. Rather than critiquing power structures, the application of the *zhiren* label views “coloniality” as a personal moral failure while reinforcing Eurocentrism by denying agency and authenticity to the internal other being targeted. Thus, in digital reactionary spaces, civilizational signifiers such as “West,” “East,” or “China” operate as flexible transnational codes to anchor postliberal political imaginations in globally networked and locally embedded discursive repertoires. This generates contingent convergence across geopolitical divides and the reassembly of seemingly contradictory political logics.

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