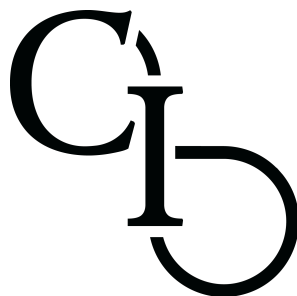


Civilization

Module 3

Allies Abroad, Enemies at Home

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CONJECTURE UNIVERSITY

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Allies Abroad

Just as disobedience is a hallmark of a dynamic, progressing society, obedience is the law of the land in a static society. China, for example, punishes disobedience not only through government tyranny (top-down) but also through private enforcement mechanisms (bottom-up).¹ The Chinese Communist Party, or the CCP, imposes a social credit system on its people through which it rewards citizens for conformity and punishes them for disobedience with literally calculated efficiency. A citizen earns credit for reporting 'deviant' neighbors, and so the CCP's monumental task of controlling their population is decentralized across countless loyal, private nodes. Every citizen who so much as thinks about living life by his own lights or defecting to Western values must consider the costs of doing so. But he also has to reckon with something more insidious: in the cage he's in, there are real advantages to crushing his own ambitions.

Of course, not all Chinese people are ever even tempted to disobey. Indeed, it could be that only a small minority currently experience such a yearning. The fewer citizens who *want* to live independently, the greater is the cost that any one of them faces for actually trying to do so. The public-private surveillance apparatus, pervasive and imposing though it is, does not enjoy unlimited resources. Moreover, every Chinese citizen who opts *into* living his own life is also one more Chinese citizen who opts *out* of participating in the decentralized spying apparatus, thereby making the entire surveillance apparatus both costlier to run and less operationally effective. This, in turn, makes it slightly easier (less risky) for the *next* person to defect, who makes it still easier for the next, and so on.

As long as the surveillance apparatus is in place, and while the CCP's legal framework is regarded as legitimate, the Chinese dissidents will have to pursue their dreams

¹ China is not an *entirely* static society, which explains how they have made as much progress as they have. Still, they are far more static than the dynamic West, so for the purposes of this module we will simply describe them as a static society without further caveat. We will investigate the existence of dynamic subcultures within static societies and vice versa in a future module.

unofficially—the cultural generalization of an economic black market. And, just as in black markets, Chinese dissidents face a cost when interacting with state sanctioned elements of society, as such actions always carry the risk of exposure. Hence we should expect Chinese dissidents to coordinate, collaborate, and trade amongst each other, if only to avoid facing such a risk. In this way, underground subcultures could emerge, evolve, and even flourish despite the suppression all around them.

As we briefly discussed in Module 2, exposure to the Western world would only empower such dynamic subcultures. Any lies they had been told about the ‘evils’ of the West could be quickly laid to rest, they could acquire arguments, explanations, and other ideas that they would struggle to find in China, and they could come to appreciate *why* the institutions of a dynamic society such as the West really are superior to those of a static society such as China.

So the CCP’s suppression of channels like the Internet not only helps to shield China’s own Great Wall of suppressive institutions from the onslaught of the West’s dynamism, but it also helps to prevent its dissidents from growing in confidence and ability.

We have seen that static societies cannot live alongside dynamic societies in stable equilibrium forever. And since dynamism, not staticity, is required for humanity to solve problems into the indefinite future, we should prefer the dynamic West to win over its static enemies. Contrary to what some Western isolationists say, then, it is very much in our interest that China evolves from its CCP-controlled state to something along the lines of liberal democratic capitalism.

Many Westerners do not see us at war with China, as no bombs are dropping, no bullets flying, no blood spilling. But traditional war is just a special case of the more general battle of ideas. Peace, error correction, scientific discovery, trade, and dispute resolution are enormous human achievements that are only possible via *institutions* that themselves consist of ideas. So any attack on the West’s memetic infrastructure from China or any other static society is an act of war—not of the literal kind, but of a more fundamental kind. It threatens peace and everything else we cherish at least as much as a physical attack does.

If we accept that the West is already in ideological, institutional warfare with China and its cohort, what should our attitude be towards their dissenters? At the *very* least, we should offer moral support (rather than apathy or, worse, antipathy). Even this small

gesture that costs little on our part could do enormous good for them, since many of them will be in transition from loyalty to defection such that little ‘pulls’ from Westerners can have outsized impact on their thinking.

We can also ‘passively’ collaborate with them by communicating and trading (when possible), thereby serving as a kind of teacher of how and why Western dynamism works. Every unapproved piece of clothing they wear and song they listen to is an act of rebellion that degrades the legitimacy of the surrounding static institutions and bolsters the young, dynamic institutions that these heroic dissidents are building.

Finally, we can ‘actively’ collaborate with them *against* China’s static institutions by offering means of support in their fight against them. The details of how Westerners might do this will vary by situation, but it includes things like sharing intel and weaponry. Again, some Westerners will decry any or all of these strategies as ‘foreign interference’, that they will have unintended consequences, that they are a waste of our resources. It is true that there could be unintended consequences, such as aggressive backlash from the Chinese government and/or its loyalists, but there are also consequences should the dissidents be extinguished—namely, an emboldened enemy of civilization. As for the cost of supporting the few ideological soldiers behind enemy lines: consider how much we stand to gain should they succeed in transforming China into a dynamic society, one whose institutions are characterized by correcting errors and fostering progress rather than entrenching errors and thwarting progress. We would benefit from trading for their untold innovations, learning from their scientific discoveries, and enriching our culture by borrowing from theirs. Seen in this tantalizing but plausible light, expending resources to help Chinese dissidents is an *investment*.

Some of these Chinese dissidents will prefer to engross themselves in Western dynamism rather than try to live inside China or transform their mother country. Once again, the Internet can help them do so, but even better than digital simulacra is the real, physical America. We should welcome such refugees with open arms. In many ways—for instance, in terms of economic productivity—a Chinese person with a Western mind can do more good *in* the West than outside of it. In institutional terms, every such refugee bolsters dynamic institutions and weakens static institutions.

Enemies at Home

Strictly speaking, even the West is not entirely dynamic, as it is still evolving out of the static cocoon from which it was born. There still exist niggling memes, subcultures, and even widespread institutions that are characterized by suppression of criticism, obedience, and enforcement of the status quo. Like static societies outside of the West, static subcultures and practices *inside* the West must eventually be dealt with—they can either evolve into dynamic versions of themselves (and so their content would rapidly change in response to rational criticism) or else be replaced by dynamic alternatives. As long as they survive in static form, they pose a risk to the entire Western project. To be sure, because they exist in the broader context of Western institutions, these static subcultures have themselves evolved (or devolved) such that they do not pose any immediate existential threat. For example, religious institutions in America often thwart progress in many ways, but rare is the American who goes on a killing spree in the name of spreading his religion. Still, for the simple reason that any static institution can, in principle, thwart progress that would otherwise foster the creation of some civilization-sparing solution, it is incumbent that all vestiges of our static past be made dynamic as quickly and painlessly as possible.

There is another reason to be wary of domestic static institutions—they are a primary means by which China and other static societies can defeat the West from within. Because dynamic institutions are dominated by rational memes—those that spread by surviving criticism—foreign memes that contain factual falsehoods and moral inversions will tend to struggle to infiltrate. For example, China would have a difficult time entrenching destructive memes in America’s physics institutions, since American physicists participate in a robust tradition of criticism that bad scientific hypotheses, faulty experimental results, and sophistry will struggle to permeate. China could succeed *temporarily* by one clever trick or another, but the American physics community is quite capable of correcting whatever errors China is able to send their way.

Nor would China benefit equally from infiltrating *any* American static institution at random—not all static institutions are equally influential on the rest of America, nor are all static institutions equally predisposed to destroy or otherwise degrade America’s dynamic institutions. For example, some American subcultures valorize young adults who become white collar professions and frown upon young adults who pursue comedy or music, *regardless* of what would make them happy. A clever enough Chinese plot could inflame this static practice by flooding social media with ‘studies’ that show a positive

correlation between happiness and white collar jobs—thereby (possibly) entrenching parents' idea that their children should pursue such jobs—and by sending agents into comedy clubs to sabotage and humiliate young comedians—thereby (possibly) causing the would-be entertainers to wonder if their parents were right, after all, that pursuing such a career was a shameful choice. And while every snuffing out creativity is always a tragedy, this little sabotage would still leave America's dynamism breathing down China's neck, still a formidable threat to its existence as a static society.

On the other hand, *school* is perhaps the most salient holdover institution from the West's static ancestors, as it is a factory that takes as inputs open, creative minds and does its best to deliver as outputs obedient, noncreative, uniform minds. Moreover, the majority of Americans experience school during their lives, and so any memes that embed themselves in the institution earn an enormous potential audience. If China could somehow infiltrate school (and possibly its cousin institutions, such as the university system and other interdependent industries), then it could inject and integrate its own static memes and, even better, have the Americans spread those memes even after they have graduated from school.

What would China want the *content* of such memes to contain? Given that their goal is to stop the West's memes from infecting China's population, China would want to spread memes across America that would make it less attractive, less capable of making progress, less self-confident, and, in the limit, civilizationally suicidal. So if China could influence, say, American universities to hire faculty that spreads such memes to their students and to others through books and academic papers, then we should expect them to do so. And, given that China will want these memes to spread by *suppressing* criticism rather than by *fostering* it, we should expect such memes to spread by, say, shame tactics, intimidation, mindless chants, moralizing, and ostracization—all surefire signs of static institutions.

What can we do in the face of such a threat? The good news is that, as I have said, all such attempts by China and others are still constrained by the fact that their targets—schools, universities, and other American institutions—exist within the broader suite of dynamic institutions. Therefore, to the extent that the targets of our enemies succumb, they will tend to make less progress than their dynamic counterparts, which means that they will deteriorate faster than their dynamic counterparts. Moreover, it is much easier for China to infiltrate *incumbent* American institutions than

new ones, since the latter tend to be under the control of fewer people, are going to be less known to the Chinese, and will tend to be founded by dynamically minded people in the first place. We may therefore ‘stay ahead’ of the Chinese by continuing to create new, fertile institutions dedicated to solving a particular problem. Finally, of course, we may *argue* with any ideology that is hostile to the West (this applies whether or not China is fueling it). Although it may be difficult to persuade someone who holds such an ideology uncritically—that is what the Chinese would want—plenty of onlookers, fencesitters, and newcomers to the debate will be open to persuasion.

That is, after all, what the West was built on.



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