

Inspirations of Human Rights Values from the Global Civilization Initiative

LU Chenyan*

Abstract: *As an old Chinese saying goes, “A single flower does not make spring; a hundred flowers in full blossom bring spring to the garden.” The proposal of the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) has profoundly addressed fundamental challenges in the governance of contemporary international human rights, such as clashes of civilizations, value antagonism, historical nihilism, and institutional fragmentation, embodying China’s institutional self-awareness and civilizational stance in reconstructing global governance discourse. Against the backdrop of the international human rights system being mired in instrumentalization and politicization, the Chinese human rights civilization proceeds from respecting the diversity of civilizations, promotes the rooting of the common values of humanity, reshapes the theoretical core and practical logic of human rights discourse by upholding fundamental principles and breaking new ground, and expands the potential pathways for global human rights governance. In terms of human rights values, the GCI breaks free from the sole dominance of Western human rights discourse and returns to the ontological logic of respecting the diversified development of human civilizations and differences in social structures. In theoretical construction, it is grounded in the basic framework of people-centeredness, development priority, and peaceful co-construction, and establishes a rights system encompassing peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom. In practical advancement, it promotes Chinese human rights diplomacy, adapts to new trends in the digital era, and builds an institutional system with modernist tension and global influence. The GCI demonstrates the systematic transcendence of the Chinese human rights civilization over traditional liberal human rights values, provides a theoretical fulcrum and institutional support for the practice of global human rights governance in the new era, and highlights the distinct advantages of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics in implementing human rights protection.*

Keywords: Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy ♦ Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) ♦ Chinese outlook on human rights ♦ Chinese human rights civilization ♦ Chinese modernization

Introduction

* LU Chenyan (陆晨燕), Doctoral Candidate in Jurisprudence at the School of Law, Renmin University of China. This paper is a phased achievement of the National Social Science Fund’s Major Project “The Generative Background, Constructive Logic, and Value Orientation of the Chinese Human Rights Knowledge System” (Project Approval Number 24&ZD129) and the National Human Rights Education and Training Base’s Major Project “Research on Human Rights Education in Chinese Schools” (Project Approval Number 16JJD820029).

In the course of human society's tortuous development and the arduous exploration of paths toward modernization, the Communist Party of China has persisted in and developed socialism with Chinese characteristics, creating a new path of Chinese modernization and a new form of human civilization. In March 2023, while attending the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting in Beijing, Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee delivered a keynote speech titled "*Join Hands on the Path Towards Modernization*," in which he proposed the "Global Civilization Initiative" (GCI)¹ for the first time, offering a Chinese solution for building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and jointly constructing a peaceful and stable international order. The order of human rights governance is an inherent and integral component of a peaceful and stable international order. Amid a changing landscape defined by the rise of unilateralism, intensifying bloc confrontation, and the growing imbalance and disorder of the global system, human rights are increasingly being politicized and instrumentalized, their core concerns gradually drifting away from the authentic purview of legal frameworks and evolving into a key arena of fierce contestation between different civilizational systems over value concepts and governance models. An in-depth examination of the human rights values embedded within the GCI helps to reconstruct the consensual foundation of international human rights discourse and provides Chinese wisdom and solutions for resolving the dilemmas of global human rights governance.

This paper takes the Global Civilization Initiative as its primary subject of research, examining the inspirations it offers for human rights values through three analytical dimensions — historical logic, theoretical logic, and practical logic — and analyzing the value leadership and institutional innovation of Chinese human rights civilization in the context of world order transformation. It begins by addressing the motivating forces of the era, noting that the hegemonic thinking displayed by Western powers — principally the United States and the United Kingdom — in constructing the postwar order caused the nascent international human rights system to be imbued with a pronounced sense of civilizational hierarchy and a Western-centric paradigm. Rooted in Chinese practice, the GCI aligns with the era's demand for a new human rights governance system amid sweeping global transformations and responds to the concrete challenges posed by the current reconstruction of the world order. The paper then examines how the GCI promotes the evolution of human rights theory in a more diverse and inclusive direction, inspiring value orientations that respect and embrace the manifold forms of human rights civilization, advancing new standards for global human rights values, and affirming that national history and culture constitute vital sources of human rights concepts, while exchange and mutual learning represent the indispensable path for the joint construction of human rights civilization. Finally, under the guidance of the GCI, China's human rights practice encompasses promoting the joint construction of a more just and equitable international human rights system, strengthening the foundational theory of human rights in the course of digital

¹ Xi Jinping, "Speech at the Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China," *Qiushi* 14 (2021).

transformation, and effectively conveying China's human rights narrative in international exchanges. In sum, the GCI provides elevated political direction for the theoretical framework of contemporary Chinese human rights studies, lays the groundwork for subsequent global governance initiatives, and offers both directional guidance and practical pathways for the advancement of the global human rights cause.

I. The Era Motivations of the Global Civilization Initiative from a Human Rights Perspective

Caring for human life, value, and dignity, and realizing the universal enjoyment of human rights, represent the common aspirations of humanity.² As the human civilizational process undergoes profound transformation and the global governance system is subject to deep-seated reconstruction, the systemic dilemmas currently confronting the international human rights system manifest principally in a monolithic understanding of "civilization," a fragmented value consensus, a rupture in cultural continuity, and the breakdown of cross-civilizational communication mechanisms. In response to these challenges, China proposed the Global Civilization Initiative, taking mutual learning among civilizations as its guiding principle and joint construction and shared benefit as its operative path, thereby providing a value consensus, institutional framework, and practical foundation for reshaping global human rights governance.

A. Historical roots of the imbalance in the international human rights system

In the evolution of the international order, the issue of human rights has always been intimately bound up with the political logic and institutional arrangements dominated by major powers. Since the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of "human rights" has traversed the dismantling of the colonial system, the ideological confrontation of the Cold War, and the wave of globalization, gradually emerging as a central issue in global governance. Although the League of Nations, established after World War I, made preliminary attempts in areas such as the protection of ethnic minorities and labor rights, "human rights" had yet to become a formal institutional concept. Following the end of World War II, the drafting of the *Charter of the United Nations* marked the systematic incorporation of "human rights" into the formal architecture of international institutions, establishing it as a vital normative basis for interstate interaction.

1. Western powers and the entry of human rights into the international arena

The entry of human rights into the field of international politics is inseparable from the promotion of Western powers, most notably the concerted efforts of the United States and the United Kingdom. On August 14, 1941, the two countries jointly issued the *Atlantic Charter* — an eight-paragraph document also known as the *Roosevelt-Churchill Declaration (Joint Declaration by the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom)*. Although its primary purpose

² Xi Jinping, "Unswayingly Follow the Path of Human Rights Development in China and Better Promote the Development of China's Human Rights Cause," *Qiushi* 12 (2022).

was not to construct an international human rights system, the *Atlantic Charter* may, in the context of ideological alignment, be regarded as an early prototype of modern human rights concepts jointly fashioned by Britain and the United States, and thus as a critical juncture at which the two powers reached a preliminary consensus on human rights. During the negotiations over the *Atlantic Charter*, Roosevelt made clear that the joint declaration should give common recognition to the “Four Freedoms”³ he had articulated, while Churchill proposed that it should reflect the “establishment of the rights of the individual on a rock.”⁴ These positions ultimately found expression in the final text: Paragraph 5, incorporating advice from the British War Cabinet, confirmed “improved labor standards, economic advancement, and social security,” which bears an intrinsic connection to the “freedom from want” among Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms; Paragraph 6 expressed the hope to see established “a peace which will afford to all nations the means of dwelling in safety within their own boundaries, and which will afford assurance that all the men in all the lands may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want” — corresponding to the political commitments of both leaders at the time.

It is thus evident that before World War II had even concluded, Western powers had already begun planning to dominate the postwar order through institutional design, with the human rights agenda serving as one of their principal levers. This value consensus, premised on ideological coordination, provided the foundational basis upon which Western powers subsequently secured agreement for the inclusion of human rights provisions in the *Charter of the United Nations* and for the elaboration of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It reveals how major powers selectively embed certain value concepts into the design of order so as to activate and institutionalize them when the occasion demands. The *Atlantic Charter* consolidated the Anglo-American alliance and became the basis on which 26 nations, including China, signed the *Declaration by the United Nations* in 1942, ultimately shaping the drafting of the *UN Charter*. Rooted in Anglo-American collaboration, the human rights agenda and its underlying value concepts thus entered the consciousness of the international community and received the imprimatur of international legitimacy. After World War II, notwithstanding the active contributions of newly independent states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to the promotion of human rights, the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union — persisting until the latter’s dissolution — cast the shadow of bloc confrontation over the human rights issue, subjecting what ought to have served the well-being of ordinary people to the distortions of geopolitical competition, a dynamic that proved ultimately self-defeating under the combined weight of theoretical contradiction and practical failure.

2. The domestic strategy and external projection of U.S. human rights policy

In the course of the joint Anglo-American effort to reconstruct the postwar international order, the institutional design and political mobilization of human rights

³ M. Glen Johnson, “The Contributions of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt to the Development of International Protection for Human Rights,” 9 *Human Rights Quarterly* 19 (1987): 22.

⁴ John Humphrey, *International Human Rights Law*, Pang Sen trans. (Beijing: World Knowledge Press, 1992), 54.

issues within the United States were particularly vigorous, driven by the intention to achieve political dominance over the reconstruction of the postwar order regardless of how the military situation might unfold. Human rights issues were thereby subject to intense politicization, becoming a lever through which the United States sought to reshape the global political landscape.

Cordell Hull, then U.S. Secretary of State and the principal architect of this effort, stated that Roosevelt's conviction had solidified four months after the German blitzkrieg on Poland: The United States must, even in wartime, plan to "create" rather than merely "join" a stable and enduring new world order under the rule of law — a goal clearly directed at the founding of a new world organization. This new order was envisioned to encompass not only the free trade in the economic sphere that Hull had originally conceived, but also the political sphere.⁵ On December 27, 1939, Hull convened a meeting of interdepartmental government officials and external experts in his office,⁶ establishing within the State Department a special unit dedicated to studying issues of peace and reconstruction. On January 8, 1940, this unit was publicly inaugurated as the Advisory Committee on Problems of Foreign Relations, with Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles as Chairman and former ambassador to Germany Hugh Wilson as vice-chairman, charged with assessing the international situation and formulating foreign policy.⁷ George Rublee, an international legal expert who had led the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) and possessed extensive frontline experience in human rights law and humanitarian law, oversaw the construction of the Committee's subordinate political subcommittee; this loosely organized body laid the institutional groundwork — through major-power mechanisms — for what would become the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The special unit was subsequently divided into three subcommittees responsible for political affairs, armament limitation, and economic questions, respectively, with the political subcommittee charged primarily with issues of peace and international organization.⁸ These bodies were tasked with demonstrating the feasibility of establishing a universal international organization, a possibility that the subsequent founding of the United Nations transformed into a reality achieved through the consensus of the parties involved.

3. The ultimate formation of the international human rights system projects a Western paradigm

On August 21, 1944, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China adopted the *Dumbarton Oaks Proposals* at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the outskirts of Washington. Chapter IX, "Arrangements for International Economic and Social Cooperation," Section A, Item 1, expressed the

⁵ Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, vol. 1 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), 731-732.

⁶ These individuals included H. G. Wells, R. Department Adviser Walton Moore; Assistant Secretary of State Berle; George S. Messersmith and Henry F. Grady; Legal Adviser Green Hackworth; Leo Pasvolksky; Economic Adviser Feis; Political Adviser Hornbeck; and Chief of the Division of European Affairs Moffat.

⁷ Ruth B. Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter: The Role of the United States, 1940-1945*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1958), 218-220.

⁸ Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, vol. 2 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948), 1626-1628.

following vision for a general international organization: “The Organization should facilitate solutions of international economic, social, and other humanitarian problems and promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This marked the first time that “human rights” as a political value entered the institutional construction of a postwar international organization, gaining formal recognition at the earliest stages of multilateral mechanism-building.⁹ From April 25 to June 26, 1945, representatives of 50 nations — including Poland, which acceded subsequently — attended the San Francisco Conference. In the course of deliberating the draft *Dumbarton Oaks Proposals*, 18 countries, including India, Australia, Panama, and France, submitted amendments on human rights issues, broadly advocating for clearer and more specific provisions in the *Charter* to strengthen the institutional protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Representatives of civil society organizations, who were specially permitted to attend, further championed the protection of human rights and expressed the desire to establish a Commission on Human Rights within the newly created international organization.¹⁰ The activities of American civil society organizations thus acquired an external dimension, constituting a significant social foundation of the postwar international human rights system.

On June 25, 1945, the nations finalized the text of the *Charter of the United Nations*. Beyond the Preamble’s affirmation of “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person”, the *Charter* contained a total of seven human rights-related provisions, constituting the first cornerstone of postwar international human rights law.¹¹ Subsequently, the Third Committee of the United Nations Economic and Social Council was designated to draft the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, a task carried out under the driving force of Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of President Roosevelt. Western powers, with the United States in the lead, adopted a strategy of “strategic withdrawal,” cautiously advancing while reserving institutional space for human rights values to enter the international normative system.¹² Building upon the human rights provisions of the *UN Charter*, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* established universally applicable human rights standards systematically for the first time, marking significant progress in institutionalization and universalization, and giving voice to perspectives rooted in five distinct cultural traditions;¹³ meanwhile, however, it reinforced a Western-centric human rights paradigm, laying institutional groundwork that would later enable developing countries to challenge the hegemonic politics pursued by Western states.¹⁴

⁹ Shu Jianzhong and Chen Lu, “The Dumbarton Oaks Conference and the Establishment of the United Nations,” *Journal of Historical Science* 6 (2021): 93; Evan Luard, *A History of the United Nations, Volume I: The Years of Western Domination, 1945-1955* (London and Basingstoke: the Macmillan Press, 1984), 25.

¹⁰ Li Xiaomei, “The Participation of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Work of the United Nations: History, Current Situation and Future,” *Chinese Review of International Law* 1 (2016): 74.

¹¹ Gong Renren, “The Emergence and Significance of Human Rights Provisions in the Charter of the United Nations,” *Chinese Journal of Human Rights* 1 (2020): 38.

¹² Liu Lianlian and Lu Chenyan, “The Expansion of Power of International Organizations: Its Logic and the Problem of Legitimacy Evaluation,” *World Economics and Politics* 1 (2025): 27.

¹³ Sam McFarland, “The Makers of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles Malik, Peng-chun Chang, John Humphrey and René Cassin,” Guoyu Hua trans., *Chaoyang Law Review* 1 (2016).

¹⁴ Zhang Xiaoling, “The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and China’s Concept of Human Rights,” *Journal*

From the moment of its entry into international norms, the concept of “human rights” was deeply embedded within an international order constructed under the dominance of major powers. This structural bias shaped the discursive foundations of normative design and planted the seeds of enduring tension in the subsequent international human rights order. The Western-dominated human rights paradigm, grounded in abstract notions of rights such as “natural rights” and the “free individual,” inevitably bears the ideological imprint of its historical context. In the contemporary era, Western-dominated human rights standards have perpetuated this internal logic, consistently privileging “liberty rights” over the “right to subsistence” and the “right to development,” and disregarding the historical circumstances and practical demands of developing countries — thereby producing a narrow, exclusionary, and at times coercive normative system. This trajectory has deepened the imbalance in global human rights governance and intensified value conflicts across civilizations, making it a focal point of critique among Global South nations.

B. Institutional evolution and transformation of the People’s Republic of China’s human rights cause

China has consistently attached great importance to human rights protection and international human rights governance, actively promoting the construction of a fair, reasonable, cooperative, and mutually beneficial global human rights governance system. During the drafting of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the Chinese delegation, led by Zhang Pengchun, advanced an important balance in the *Declaration* with regard to respect for cultural diversity and the coexistence of civilizations — a contribution that became a vital foundation for the integration and inclusivity of global human rights cultures¹⁵ and laid both the conceptual and institutional groundwork for the People’s Republic of China’s subsequent participation in international human rights affairs. In 1971, the People’s Republic of China resumed its lawful seat in the United Nations and formally entered the multilateral international system.¹⁶ Since then, China’s participation in international human rights affairs can be broadly divided into two historical stages and four evolutionary periods, tracing a historical leap from limited participation to institutional engagement, and from institutional engagement to normative construction and discursive contribution.

1. Historical origins: early voices of the human rights cause

China’s engagement with international human rights affairs did not initially center on institutional cooperation; rather, under specific historical conditions, it developed an independent human rights discourse through a political posture of anti-colonialism and anti-oppression. In the early years following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, attention to human rights was concentrated primarily on the large-scale and gross violations of human rights perpetrated through colonialism,

of the Party School of the CPC Central Committee 3 (1998): 57.

¹⁵ Zhu Liyu, “The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a Model of Multicultural Integration,” *Modern Law Science* 5 (2008): 3.

¹⁶ Luo Yanhua, “The Course of the People’s Republic of China’s Participation in International Human Rights Affairs and Its Contributions,” *Human Rights* 3 (2019): 87.

racism, and foreign aggression and occupation. China opposed the use of human rights issues as a pretext for interfering in the internal affairs of other states, and advocated prioritizing what were, for developing countries, the most pressing concerns: the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights and the right to development.¹⁷

In 1955, Zhou Enlai led a delegation to the Bandung Conference and signed the *Bandung Declaration*. The Conference strongly condemned systems of racial segregation and discrimination, and in Section C, “Human Rights and Self-Determination,” the *Declaration* explicitly endorsed the fundamental human rights principles enshrined in the *UN Charter* and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, while emphasizing that national self-determination is a prerequisite for the enjoyment of all human rights. This marked the first time that developing countries intervened collectively in international human rights discourse and established the important human rights path of “anti-colonialism and anti-racism.” In the collective expression of Asian and African nations, apartheid and colonial rule were characterized not merely as systematic violations of human rights but as a negation of the entire order of human civilization. Grave human rights violations were understood not merely as manifestations of governance failure but as a form of anti-civilizational institutional violence. This approach — situating human rights within a civilizational reinterpretation of decolonization — provided an ethical foundation for China’s subsequent proposal of the Global Civilization Initiative, while also marking the historical efforts of developing countries to carve out space for human rights expression beyond the confines of established international institutions. Although China had not yet fully engaged with institutional mechanisms such as the UN Commission on Human Rights, an independent Chinese human rights discourse was preliminarily established through diplomatic platforms such as the Bandung Conference.

2. Institutional evolution: the deployment of dual logics

The evolution of China’s human rights system can be analyzed along two logical dimensions. The first concerns the institutional construction of human rights within China’s national governance framework, tracing a three-stage trajectory from the initial formation of a rights framework and the establishment of a developmental logic to full systemic maturity. The second concerns the development of a discourse system and institutional mechanisms for China’s engagement in international human rights governance, reflecting a three-stage progression from rule-acceptance to normative construction. These two strands are interwoven: together they establish both the legal character and governance foundation of “human rights,” while also demonstrating China’s proactive engagement and role transformation in the construction of the global governance order — collectively constituting the dual internal and external dimensions of China’s human rights discourse.

At the level of domestic institutional construction, the development of China’s human rights cause since the founding of the People’s Republic of China has passed

¹⁷ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *Human Rights in China* (White Paper), (Beijing: Hongqi Press, 1991), 252.

through three historical stages.¹⁸ The first stage established the socialist system and the principle of people's democracy, preliminarily constructing a state-led rights protection framework. Through institutional transformations encompassing land reform, socialist transformation, marriage legislation, the system of people's congresses, and regional ethnic autonomy, the state achieved the institutional affirmation and implementation of basic human rights. The second stage commenced with reform and opening-up, taking "promoting human rights through development" as its core logic. In 1982, the new *Constitution* built a bridge between citizens and persons, the people and the individual, the collective and the self, and the domestic and international spheres through its human rights provisions. In 2004, the principle that "the State respects and protects human rights" was incorporated into the *Constitution*, marking a milestone in the constitutional history of the People's Republic of China.¹⁹ Multiple rounds of National Human Rights Action Plans were launched, covering political, economic, cultural, and ecological domains, gradually forming a systematic structure of rights policies. The third stage began with the Eighteenth National Congress of the CPC. China further established the concept that "a happy life for the people is the greatest human right,"²⁰ and in practice — through the implementation of the *Civil Code* and the historic victory in the campaign against poverty — achieved the systematization, institutionalization, and normalization of human rights protection, with the institutional structure approaching full maturity.

With respect to participation in the international human rights system, post-reform China has demonstrated a gradual progression from rule-taker to norm-shaper, which may likewise be divided into three phases. The first is the Initial Stage of Institutional Participation (1978-1991), during which China, adhering to the principles of seeking truth from facts and maintaining independence, progressively signed and acceded to 11 core international human rights treaties, including the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, the *Convention against Torture*, and the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. In 1983, China became a member of the UN Commission on Human Rights — the predecessor of the Human Rights Council — for the first time, and during the 1980s began participating in the negotiation and drafting of several core human rights treaties. In 1986, China facilitated the adoption of the *Declaration on the Right to Development*, explicitly proposing that the right to development of developing countries constitutes an integral component of the human rights system. The second is the Stage of Conceptual Breakthrough and Proactive Response (1991-2006). In 1991, China's first white paper on human rights was published. In 1993, China actively facilitated the adoption of the *Vienna Declaration*

¹⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *The Communist Party of China and Human Rights Protection — A 100-Year Quest* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2021), 8.

¹⁹ Han Dayuan, "Twenty Years of the Implementation of the 'Human Rights Clause': Achievements, Significance and Issues," *Human Rights* 3 (2024): 13.

²⁰ "Xi Jinping Stresses Adhering to a Human Rights Development Path Suited to National Conditions and Promoting All-Round Human Development in a Letter to the Symposium Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *People's Daily*, December 11, 2018, 1.

and *Programme of Action*, expressing support for the reform process of the UN human rights system. China signed the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* in 1997 and 1998, respectively. These two covenants, together with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, constitute the principal framework of the United Nations International Bill of Human Rights,²¹ marking China's transition in the field of human rights from a declaratory stance to a formal legal and institutional commitment. The third is the Stage of Institutional Construction and Discourse Reshaping (2006-present). In 2006, the UN Human Rights Council was formally established to replace the Commission on Human Rights. China has actively participated in its institutional construction and reform process, supporting the establishment of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism, and has since served continuously as a member state, engaging deeply in special procedures and the work of treaty bodies. At the level of discourse formation, China proposed the concept of "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind"; UN Security Council Resolution 2344 was the first official UN document to employ this concept.²² China has also promoted the adoption of resolutions, including "The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights" and "Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights."²³

3. Role transformation: the construction of Chinese subjectivity

The history of the People's Republic of China's participation in international human rights governance is a history of development from the periphery to the center, from passive response to proactive shaping, and from institutional adaptation to conceptual innovation. Under the Cold War configuration, China did not unreflectively enter the international human rights system; rather, through South-South cooperation platforms such as the Bandung Conference, it established a collective human rights expression centered on anti-colonialism and anti-racism. This discursive tradition — grounded in decolonization and the reconstruction of civilizational order — laid the underlying civilizational-political structure for subsequent institutional participation and conceptual innovation, enabling China to construct a preliminary independent expression framework with distinctly subjective characteristics even before it had been fully integrated into the UN human rights system.

In 1971, China resumed its lawful seat in the United Nations, progressively dismantling institutional barriers and initiating systematic engagement with international human rights mechanisms. The *Constitution* of 1982 and the 2004 *Constitutional Amendment* of 2004 established the constitutional standing of the principle that "the State respects and protects human rights," and China's human rights cause has continued to deepen and consolidate. From the signing and fulfillment of human rights treaties, to continuous membership in the Human Rights Council, to institutional practice within the UPR mechanism, China has gradually

²¹ Hua Guoyu, "The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and China," *Human Rights* 1 (2015): 136.

²² United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2344 (2017), S/RES/2344 (2017).

²³ United Nations Human Rights Council, 34th Session Documents A/HRC/34/4 and A/HRC/34/12.

achieved a profound transformation of institutional embeddedness. At the conceptual level, China has shifted from defensive interpretation to proactive discourse production, advancing original theoretical concepts such as “promoting human rights through development” and “whole-process people’s democracy,” thereby expanding the semantic frontiers of the human rights domain.

The construction of “Chinese subjectivity” is not a one-time institutional achievement but a continuous process of transformation spanning historical narrative, institutional construction, and discourse generation — one that responds both to critical reflections on pre-modern political oppression and to the focal critiques of “imbalance, narrowness, and politicization” leveled at contemporary international human rights mechanisms. In the current global governance landscape, where multipolarity and institutional transformation coexist, Chinese human rights civilization is, through its depth of practice and discursive originality, expanding the diverse pathways of human rights while simultaneously reshaping the normative center of gravity of the international legal order. Human rights practices with Chinese characteristics are continuously nurturing Chinese human rights concepts possessed of genuine theoretical originality.

C. The call for a new human rights governance system under the great changes

The world today is undergoing changes unseen in a century. As a crucial component of global governance, the systemic defects of human rights governance are becoming increasingly apparent. Issues such as institutional imbalance, discourse monopoly, and a deficit of trust in the human rights field are intertwined and mutually compounding, constraining the healthy development of the global human rights cause and exposing a structural crisis in the current international human rights system with respect to fairness, representation, and sustainability. The institutional dilemmas of global human rights governance are currently concentrated in the following three dimensions.

1. Conflicts of national interest impeding global human rights consensus

Although the Cold War has ended, the Cold War mentality and ideological confrontation have not dissipated, and differences in human rights concepts among nations remain pronounced. Western developed countries tend to prioritize civil and political rights, while many developing countries place greater emphasis on socioeconomic rights and the importance of collective development. Furthermore, divergences in national conditions — rooted in distinct historical, cultural, and political systems — compounded by ideological competition, make it difficult for international human rights standards to achieve universal recognition on a global scale, further eroding the foundation for global human rights cooperation.

2. Double standards undermining the fairness of human rights governance

When addressing human rights issues, certain countries exhibit selective attention or apply double standards, frequently adopting a permissive attitude toward the human rights records of their allies while subjecting competitors or non-aligned states to stringent criticism and sanctions. This has given rise to widespread questioning of the fairness and authority of global human rights governance, rendering international consensus on the issue increasingly elusive. Some countries,

while disregarding their own human rights deficiencies, intervene in the internal affairs of other nations under the banner of “human rights over sovereignty.” Such interventions are widely perceived as politically motivated, rendering the tension between national sovereignty and human rights protection all the more acute.

3. The instrumentalization of human rights issues eroding the legitimacy of human rights governance

Human rights issues have been assigned political and diplomatic functions, becoming instruments through which certain countries exert influence in international arenas, bolster their international moral standing, and even justify the imposition of sanctions and diplomatic pressure on other states. Human rights are no longer the subject of discussions grounded in global cooperation and shared values but have become tools in the service of specific political agendas, devolving from bridges for international cooperation into frontlines for the exacerbation of interstate conflict. This has undermined the foundation of trust within the international community on human rights matters, engendered doubts about the true motivations behind human rights advocacy, and weakened the fairness and effectiveness of global human rights governance. Many deep-seated human rights concerns — such as poverty eradication and climate change — are frequently overlooked precisely because they fall outside politicized agendas, further intensifying the challenges confronting global human rights governance.

Understanding the salient problems facing the global human rights field constitutes the logical prerequisite and practical foundation for advancing the transformation of the human rights governance system. The Global Civilization Initiative emerged against this backdrop, emphasizing the equality of civilizations and the principle of mutual learning for coexistence. It advocates for reshaping the global human rights governance paradigm and reconstructing the prevailing order based on the pluralistic coexistence of human rights concepts and governance models. The Initiative responds to the international community’s urgent demand for the depoliticization of human rights issues, transcends conventional ideological oppositions, and at the institutional level offers a governance philosophy premised on civilizational equality, pathway diversity, and cooperative construction.

II. Innovation in Human Rights Theory Guided by the Global Civilization Initiative

While the meaning of the term “human rights” is subject to various interpretations, a fundamental consensus persists: human rights are the product of humanity’s quest for self-liberation and development, and a fruit of the progress of human civilization.²⁴ The Global Civilization Initiative focuses on the independent value, equal standing, and mutual-learning pathways of civilizations, re-examining human rights within the context of diverse cultures and social structures, and proposing the construction of a common value system for all of humanity centered on peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom. This provides an

²⁴ Lu Guangjin et al., *An Introduction to the Chinese Human Rights Civilization* (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2023), 2.

institutional alternative path for transcending the monolithic narrative dominated by the liberal conception of human rights.

A. Respecting and embracing the diverse forms of human rights civilization

Diversity has always been a key driving force behind institutional renewal and the generation of value consensus within human civilization. The Global Civilization Initiative places “respecting the diversity of world civilizations” at the forefront, emphasizing equal treatment and mutual enrichment among civilizations. From the heterogeneity of cultural traditions to the historical evolution of human rights concepts, and from the diverse explorations of institutional practice, civilizational diversity is not merely an objective reality but also a legitimate basis upon which states may independently choose their paths of human rights development, and a lawful source of institutional guarantees. Respecting and embracing the diverse forms of human rights civilization responds to the normative tensions within the human rights discourse system and lays the ideological foundation for reshaping the global human rights governance paradigm.

1. The differentiation of civilizations and the divergence of human rights concepts

“China advocates for strengthening exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, promoting international cooperation in human rights, and advancing the better development of the human rights cause in all countries.”²⁵ Grounded in differentiated civilizations, the human rights practices of different countries can’t be confined to a single model or set of standards. “Jointly advocating for respect for the diversity of world civilizations” is the primary proposition of the Global Civilization Initiative — a rational choice made by each civilization based on its distinctiveness, a logical requirement for the divergence and development of human rights concepts, and an objective reality that must be confronted in constructing a more just and reasonable international human rights governance system. From a human rights perspective, adhering to equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusiveness among human rights civilizations — and advocating for the elimination of barriers through exchange, the overcoming of conflicts through mutual learning, and the dismantling of claims to superiority through inclusiveness — constitutes a systematic corrective to “human rights hegemonism” and is an inherent requirement for advancing the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

In the 19th century, Russian historical philosopher Nikolai Danilevsky proposed the theory of “cultural-historical types,” systematically articulating that human history is a structural process in which multiple cultural types develop independently and converge within their respective temporal and spatial contexts, and that no culture loses its significance due to the emergence of “more advanced” cultures.²⁶ Although

²⁵ Xi Jinping, “Letter of Congratulations to the 2015 Beijing Forum on Human Rights,” *People’s Daily*, September 17, 2015, 1.

²⁶ Dai Weilai, “The Civilizational Turn in World Political Discourse: A Cognitive Analysis of Russia’s Civilizational-State Narrative,” *Dongfang Journal* (Winter December 2024): 13.

critics have argued that this view blurs religious and political issues,²⁷ Danilevsky's opposition to evaluating civilizations as "superior" or "inferior" based on a single standard represents a progressive perspective. Arnold J. Toynbee, a 20th-century British philosopher of history, introduced the "Challenge-and-Response" model of civilizations in *A Study of History*.²⁸ Taking the Aegean civilization, the Amazonian tribal civilization, and the Angkor civilization as examples, he systematically critiqued racial and geographical determinism, arguing that no civilization is inherently "superior." Instead, each civilization responds to challenges in its own way, evolving distinct institutional and cultural structures. Toynbee emphasized that the interaction between civilizations is a key driver of historical evolution. Completed over nearly 30 years, spanning the period before and after World War II, Toynbee's work, despite being criticized by defenders of Western civilization as overly subjective²⁹ and tinged with spiritual determinism³⁰ due to his introduction of spiritual factors, is profoundly marked by the era's global crises and reflections on civilization, highlighting his insights into the "laws of the rise and fall of civilizations."³¹ These perspectives provide a solid foundation in the philosophy of history for civilizational equality and dialogue, aligning closely with the concept in the Global Civilization Initiative that "civilizations become more vibrant through exchanges and richer through mutual learning."

2. The history, concepts, and norms of pluralistic human rights

The proposition of pluralistic human rights condenses humanity's collective experience of confronting oppression and pursuing liberation throughout history, conveying the independent reflections of diverse civilizational traditions on the core value of the human person. Although the concept of human rights first came into being within the Western Enlightenment tradition, its development has never been severed from the rich sustenance provided by diverse civilizational legacies. Nascent forms of human rights consciousness can be discerned in the rational philosophy of ancient Greece ("Man is the measure of all things"), the compassionate ethics of Indian Buddhism ("All living beings are equal"), and the political wisdom of Chinese Confucianism ("The benevolent person loves others" and "The people are the foundation of the state"). These civilizational roots provide abundant intellectual

²⁷ Sergei Vedyashkin, "Orthodox Christian Unity Broken by 'Russian World' Heresy", *The Moscow Times*, March 15, 2022, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/15/orthodox-christian-unity-broken-by-russian-world-heresy-a76922>.

²⁸ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. 1, 6th impression (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 271-272.

²⁹ Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (London: Collins, 1955), 158-178.

³⁰ W. H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951): 164-165.

³¹ In the preface to the abridged edition of *A Study of History*, Toynbee stated: "Between this book and me stands the war of 1939-1945 (...) Volumes IV to VI were published forty-one days before the outbreak of the war." See D. C. Somervell, ed., *A Study of History*, vol. 1, Xiaoling Guo et al. trans. (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2010), 1; Zhang Wenmu, "Toynbee's Study of History and Britain's Postwar Foreign Policy," *World Economics and Politics* 3 (2011): 4.

resources and historical reference points for the contemporary pluralistic development of human rights.

The Marxist view of human rights consistently emphasizes the historical, social, and class-bound nature of rights, holding that human rights are not abstract or innate legal principles but concrete reflections of class-based social relations under specific historical conditions. Hegel once remarked that human rights are not inherent at birth but rather emerge historically.³² In *On the Jewish Question*, Karl Marx also expressed a similar view: human rights do not liberate people from religion but grant them the freedom to practice religion; they do not liberate people from property but grant them the freedom to own property; they do not liberate people from the sordid pursuit of profit but instead confer the freedom to engage in such pursuits.³³ Human rights are both historical and grounded in reality, ultimately serving the cause of human freedom and liberation, and are inherently tied to people's actual living conditions and the structure of social institutions. Any practice that, in the name of "universal values", absolutizes and monopolizes the Western liberal conception of human rights obscures the essence of human rights and constitutes an ideological operation that abstracts and sanctifies specific social systems.

In modern political practice and institutional construction, pluralistic human rights concepts have been progressively translated into diverse human rights norms. Since the 20th century, the international human rights normative system represented by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has laid the foundational framework for international human rights law. However, due to its inherently Western-centric formulation process and long-standing influence of liberal values, it has insufficiently addressed the demands of late-developing nations for rights such as development and subsistence, leaving the Global South marginalized for an extended period. Developing countries have made sustained efforts in this regard: from the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights* (1981) to the *Beijing Declaration* (2017), the connotation of human rights has continuously expanded from individual freedoms to collective rights, and from political rights to emerging domains such as the right to development and the right to a healthy environment, constituting the institutional reality and practical foundation of pluralistic human rights.

Based on synthesizing historical experience and responding to contemporary tensions, the Global Civilization Initiative takes civilizational diversity as its foundation and the common values of all humanity as its core concept. It breaks through the tendency of traditional Western theories to "de-culturalize" and "de-contextualize" human rights, emphasizing instead that common values must be constructed on the premise of respect for cultural subjectivity. Human rights are thus no longer a static, linearly evolving normative system, but a dynamic outcome of exchange and mutual learning among civilizations and the autonomous institutional practices of individual nations.

B. Building a new system and new standards for global human rights values

³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 1 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2009), 313.

³³ *Ibid.*, 312.

The great changes unseen in a century provide a historic opportunity for the structural reconstruction of the international human rights value system. While respecting and embracing diverse civilizations, one must remain vigilant against sliding into the logical trap of “cultural relativism” — denying value judgments or blurring the boundary between justice and injustice on the grounds of civilizational diversity.³⁴ To avoid such a tendency, it is necessary to construct a robust new system of common values for humanity, which constitutes the second advocacy of the Global Civilization Initiative. With the promotion of the common values of all mankind at its core, the Initiative explicitly proposes six values — peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom — as the common pursuits of human society. This is a new system of human rights values, and also a new set of global human rights standards, providing a value foundation, theoretical guidance, and institutional imagination for global human rights governance, and evolving into an emerging “global human rights consciousness” and “global civilizational consciousness.”

1. Peace and development

Without peace, no protection of rights can be realized. As the most fundamental human right, the right to peace constitutes the logical starting point of the international human rights system. Wars, sanctions, interference, and violent conflicts do not merely take lives; they destroy social structures, cultural systems, and human dignity itself. China advocates for the joint construction of “indivisible security” through the Global Security Initiative, emphasizing the resolution of differences through dialogue, consultation, and cooperation, and resolutely opposing acts that undermine the sovereignty and peaceful development of other countries under the banner of human rights. Peace thus becomes the fundamental guarantee for all human rights.

If peace is the external guarantee, development provides the endogenous impetus for human rights practice. In many developing countries, the right to development remains the most urgent and fundamental human right bearing on people’s livelihoods. Without basic access to education, medical care, housing, and clean water, individual freedoms and political rights become empty abstractions. The UN *Declaration on the Right to Development* affirms that “development is an inalienable human right,” and the Global Civilization Initiative represents China’s systematic, normalized, and internationalized expression of this conviction.

2. Equity and justice

Equity is the basic yardstick for measuring the justice of social order and the reasonableness of institutional arrangements. It concerns equality of opportunity at the starting point and the universal application of rules and the basic balance of outcomes. In practice, many developing countries encounter institutional discrimination and structural inequality in global human rights governance, reflecting the “equity deficit”

³⁴ “Cultural relativism” originally emphasized the validity of values within different cultural contexts. However, when it is misused to deny universal judgments or reject international consensus, it can become an excuse to obscure human rights violations and value disorder. Multiple United Nations agencies, including the General Assembly, UNESCO, and the Human Rights Council, have explicitly opposed such relativism. See United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, Art. 4; United Nations Human Rights Council, “Advisory Committee Study on Advancing Human Rights through Better Understanding of Traditional Values of Humankind,” A/HRC/22/71, December 6, 2012.

of the current global institutional system. China advocates for the reform of global governance mechanisms, emphasizing that developing countries should have a greater say and stronger representation. By promoting the construction of global human rights consultation mechanisms, China seeks to advance the transition of human rights systems from rule implementation to rule co-construction, achieving a wider scope of rights sharing and greater structural justice.

Justice is not merely the protection of individual rights but also the moral foundation of institutional arrangements, requiring a people-centered approach to balancing values in national governance and achieving an organic unity of national interests, social stability, and individual freedom. Western liberalism tends to reduce “justice” to procedural rationality while neglecting public interests, historical responsibilities, and overall social coordination. China’s human rights practice emphasizes both the rule of law and the cultivation of virtue, attends to both the individual and the collective, and promotes intergenerational equity, regional balance, and ecological civilization — achieving institutional justice on the basis of balancing people’s well-being with social fairness.

3. Democracy and freedom

As General Secretary Xi Jinping noted during a joint press conference with U.S. President Barack Obama: “Democracy and human rights are the common pursuit of mankind, while the right of people in all countries to independently choose their own development paths must be respected.”³⁵ Democracy is the institutionalized expression of human rights and an important benchmark for measuring the level of governance modernization. In the development of the Western democratic model, Joseph A. Schumpeter directly equated competitive elections with democracy,³⁶ while Larry Diamond’s three basic conditions for a democratic polity pointed toward regular, fair, and inclusive democratic elections.³⁷ Such formulations have labeled political systems outside the Western “liberal democratic” framework as “non-democratic,” a logic carried to its conclusion by Francis Fukuyama’s judgment in *The End of History and the Last Man* that this particular form of democratic system represented the terminus of historical development.³⁸ China has proposed whole-process people’s democracy, integrating democratic forms encompassing elections, consultations, administration, and oversight. It emphasizes starting from the people, being grounded in the people, and relying on the people for implementation — serving as the most profound institutional embodiment of the principle that “the people are the masters of the country.” This breaks through the narrative that Western-style democracy is the uniquely correct model, providing theoretical support and institutional reference for the legitimacy of diverse democratic forms.

³⁵ “Xi Jinping and U.S. President Barack Obama Meet the Press,” *People’s Daily*, September 26, 2015, 2.

³⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Wu Liangjian trans. (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1999), 259.

³⁷ Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Chen Gaohua trans. (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014).

Freedom is a vital core of modern human rights thought, but it should not become a pretext for disrupting order, nor be instrumentalized as a bargaining chip in political struggle. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx defined freedom as the species-essence of man. China advocates for the realization of freedom within the framework of the rule of law, emphasizing that freedom must be unified with responsibility and coordinated with the public interest. This institutional understanding of freedom overcomes the one-sided logic of the Western absolutization of individual rights, foregrounding the concrete, institutional, and cooperative dimensions of freedom. It is a necessary mechanism to maintain social harmony and stability and safeguard individual dignity.

Together, these six values constitute a complete and integrated system of human rights categories. It articulates China's stance on human rights values while responding to the international community's increasingly strong expectations for human rights that are pluralistic, just, and conducive to mutual benefit. Grounded in the broad demands of developing countries, anchored in the well-being of the people, and advancing through global cooperation, this system injects new vitality into the global human rights cause and provides strong value support and a practical fulcrum for the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

C. Drawing human rights resources from one's own history and culture

Civilization is the matrix of human rights, and history its mirror. In an era of deepening multipolarization and globalization, it is all the more essential for countries to draw indigenous resources for human rights concepts from their own history and culture. The Global Civilization Initiative proposes "stressing the inheritance and innovation of civilizations," precisely emphasizing that institutional construction cannot be detached from the contextual and spiritual foundations of history and culture. The Chinese view of human rights is a theoretical achievement rooted in the texture of local human rights civilization and tempered through historical practice. This further attests that human rights should not be confined to a single model but should achieve co-construction and convergence through mutual learning among civilizations.

1. Civilizational tradition as the foundation of human rights legitimacy

Human rights have never been a universal proposition emerging naturally in a cultural vacuum; rather, they are normative and discursive systems that gradually establish their legitimacy within specific civilizational contexts. Across different cultural traditions, the cognition of "what it means to be human," the norms of "rights that humans should enjoy," the understanding of the relationship between "the individual and the state," and the institutional expression of "human dignity" together constitute the basis for understanding human rights concepts in diverse civilizations. Civilizational traditions furnish the semantic framework for the concept of human rights and provide deep cultural support for the political legitimacy and institutional acceptance of human rights systems.

In ancient Greece, the proposition that "man is the measure of all things" initiated philosophical inquiries into the value of the human being. Aristotle, in turn,

emphasized that a just political system ought to reflect the common interest,³⁹ a view that became one of the foundational sources for the tradition of “the common good” in Western political philosophy, representing an early exploration of the legitimacy of human rights institutions based on rationality and the rule of law. Within Indian civilization, the expression of such legitimacy of human rights was largely realized through ethical pathways. The *Second Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka*, in outlining the principles of *Dharma* and duty,⁴⁰ articulated the four ethical dimensions of social life under the governance of *Dharma*: parent-child relationships, teacher-student relationships, relationships between humans and other living beings, and the internal relationship of individuals with themselves.⁴¹ By integrating Buddhist ethics into the system of state governance, Emperor Aśoka provided a political vision of inclusivity, the protection of life, and peace. This vision furnished the ruling logic for integrating diverse groups during his reign, and also endured as a composite of civilizational narratives and institutional symbolism throughout the modern construction of the Indian state, constituting the spiritual source of the legitimacy of modern Indian human rights.

The German thinker Karl Jaspers, in his work *The Origin and Goal of History*, introduced the concept of the “Axial Age.” He pointed out that during the centuries from 800 BCE to 200 BCE, several major civilizations, including China, India, and Greece, almost simultaneously transcended mythological thinking and developed philosophical systems centered on “human spiritual autonomy.”⁴² Figures such as Confucius, Laozi, the Buddha, Heraclitus, Plato, and Isaiah emerged during this period. The “fundamental questions about human nature, humanity’s relationship with the world, and morality” they addressed across different civilizations became the common foundation for humanity’s pursuit of universality. It is evident that human rights are not the exclusive creation of any single civilization but rather a crystallization of ideas nurtured over the long term within diverse civilizations. The affirmation and institutional expression of “the legitimate existence of human beings” across different civilizations have endowed the concept of human rights with profound cultural heritage and historical dynamism.

2. The humanistic spirit and institutional generation of Chinese culture

The fine traditional Chinese culture contains profound humanistic thought and a spirit of social concern, constituting the cultural foundation and historical background of Chinese human rights civilization. From the political convictions that “the people are the foundation of the state,” “the will of Heaven is revealed through the will of the people,” and “the people are more important than the ruler,” to the ethical doctrines of “the benevolent person loves others,” “extending oneself to others,” and “universal

³⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, (Beijing: Commercial Press, 1983), 133.

⁴⁰ Vincent A. Smith, *Asoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India*, Yinghui Gao trans. (Beijing: Huawen Press, 2019), 124.

⁴¹ Lu Nan, “Governance by Dharma: Emperor Ashoka and the Legal Culture of Indian Buddhism,” *Peking University Law Journal* 3 (2022): 565.

⁴² Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Li Xuetao trans. (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2018), 8-13.

love and non-aggression,” and onward to the social ideals of “the supremely skilled healer cures the state” and “the world belongs to the public” — ancient Chinese civilization has consistently placed human value and the conditions of human existence at the core of social order. Confucianism emphasized “benevolent governance” and “rites and righteousness,” advocating rule by virtue and a people-centered approach, possessing the essential character of early rights protection. Mohism, with its doctrines of “universal love” and “non-aggression” grounded in equality, opposed unjust wars and social deprivation and represented an early form of consciousness regarding the right to peace and the right to life. Taoism respects nature and individual nature, advocating “governing by non-action” and “small state with few people,” reflecting respect for human freedom and tranquility. These intertwined ideas shaped the cultural tradition of ancient Chinese society, which valued ethics, harmony, and collectivism, and also provided intellectual resources for developing a human rights theory with Chinese characteristics today.

Since modern times, in the dual process of striving for national independence and social transformation, the Chinese people have gradually awakened to an awareness of the “human” as both a political subject and a historical subject. The invasion by foreign powers and colonial oppression severely disrupted the traditional civilizational order, and the survival and dignity of the people were long trampled upon. In this historical context, human rights emerged from the framework of traditional political ethics and began to transform into institutional claims supported by the legal principles of the modern state. From its very founding, the Communist Party of China explicitly advanced the fundamental purpose of “serving the people wholeheartedly,”⁴³ establishing the liberation of the people and national independence as its fundamental political objectives. In responding to national suffering and exploring institutional pathways for modern state-building, and through the profound transformations brought about by revolution and systemic restructuring, China gradually accomplished a civilizational transformation in which human-centered values were internalized into a legal order, thereby forming both the spiritual foundation and the practical basis of the Chinese path of human rights.

D. Promoting the co-construction of human rights civilizations through exchange and mutual learning

In the evolving process of global human rights governance, mutual learning among civilizations has become a vital pathway to resolving institutional conflicts and value oppositions. Following the Cold War, the international community experienced an intensified fracture in human rights standards and governance approaches. The Global Civilization Initiative’s call to “strengthen international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation” responds to this structural dilemma, emphasizing the promotion of a civilizational consensus that balances diversity and universality through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Today, from the communication mechanisms on human rights issues to emerging fields like digital human rights, and further to the institutional innovations within international cooperation frameworks, mutual learning among civilizations provides theoretical

⁴³ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol. 3 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991), 1094-1095.

support and practical logic for human rights, and also infuses cultural dynamism and institutional vitality into building a more just and equitable international human rights order.

1. Breaking the “clash of civilizations” narrative

After the end of the Cold War, Samuel Huntington put forward the “clash of civilizations” thesis, arguing that international conflicts in the post–Cold War era had shifted from ideological confrontation to civilizational conflict. He regarded Confucian, Arab, and Christian civilizations as mutually opposing units and maintained that the core of future international conflict would no longer be ideology, but cultural roots.⁴⁴ In practice, this view has been used to reinforce claims of the superiority of Western systems and values, thereby entrenching an exclusionary narrative structure in the field of human rights. Against a backdrop in which global human rights issues have become highly politicized and confrontational, the question arises: how can cooperative consensus among civilizations be rebuilt, how can the space for global human rights governance be expanded, and how can we transcend civilizational conflict so that people may truly enjoy well-being? The Global Civilization Initiative explicitly proposes to “jointly advocate strengthened international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation.” In essence, it seeks to restore the dialogue-based, constructive, and cooperative nature of human rights issues, break down the “value barriers” and “institutional divides” long shaped by Western-dominated narratives, and transform human rights into a platform through which people of all countries can enhance mutual understanding and affinity.

2. Expanding platforms for people-to-people exchange

Human rights issues are inherently humanistic, universal, and public in nature, and should serve as a “common language” through which global society engages in voluntary exchange and mutual understanding. Jointly advocating enhanced international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation entails more diverse and broader forms of interaction and collaboration in the field of human rights. From “official — non-governmental” channels to “online — offline” platforms, and from “multilateral mechanisms” to “regional networks,” the breadth and depth of global cultural cooperation continue to expand. An increasing number of countries and regions are participating in human rights dialogue through diverse platforms, thereby reshaping the global structure of trust. Meanwhile, the rapid development of digital technology has created new spaces for global human rights cooperation. With the advent of a new digital era, “digital human rights” have attracted growing attention, and emerging issues such as digital rights, data sovereignty, and algorithmic discrimination have opened up new practical domains for global human rights cooperation. China advocates adapting to these trends by promoting the establishment of an open, inclusive, fair, and reasonable platform for dialogue on digital human rights — one that both safeguards national information sovereignty and injects humanistic values into the governance of global public affairs.

3. Building an inclusive consensus structure

⁴⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Zhou Qi, Liu Fei, Zhang Liping, and Wang Yuan trans. (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House, 1998).

“Civilizations lack clear boundaries; they can transcend political borders and extend into broader spaces.”⁴⁵ The international community increasingly regards dialogue among civilizations as an important pathway for building consensus, bridging differences, and improving global governance. The United Nations has consistently identified human rights, development, and security as the three pillars of global governance. In June 2024, the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution proposed by China to establish the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations. The resolution explicitly incorporated elements of the Global Civilization Initiative and designated June 10 each year as the “International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations.” This marks the first time that China’s perspectives on civilization and human rights have been incorporated into a United Nations resolution in the form of an official document, carrying significant institutional and procedural implications. Dialogue and exchange among civilizations have thus become an important component of the global agenda. Civilizations, while preserving their own distinctive characteristics, actively engage in interaction and exchange, drawing on each other’s beneficial achievements, seeking common ground amid diversity, and enhancing mutual understanding amid differences.

III. Inspirations for Human Rights Practice under the Guidance of the Global Civilization Initiative

The proposal of the Global Civilization Initiative represents not only China’s theoretical contribution to the transformation of the global governance system but also an important action plan that is progressively realizing a transition from concept to institution and from declaration to practice. Since its first articulation in 2023, the Initiative has received institutional responses and consensual support across a series of major multilateral diplomatic occasions. Whether at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting, the BRICS Summit, or multilateral institutions such as the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, the core concepts of the Initiative — equality among civilizations, mutual learning and inclusiveness, and win-win cooperation — are being transformed from conceptual declarations into common vocabulary within the global governance system, and the Initiative’s concepts have been incorporated into UN General Assembly resolutions. On the path toward building a community with a shared future for mankind, China is both an advocate and a practitioner.⁴⁶ At the level of values, the recognition of human rights possesses universality; at the level of realization, however, human rights practices are specific to the particular conditions of each country.⁴⁷ The Initiative and

⁴⁵ Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, “Note on the Notion of Civilization,” Benjamin Nelson trans., *Social Research*, vol. 38, 4 (1971): 808-813.

⁴⁶ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2023).

⁴⁷ Chang Jian and Zhao Yulin, “Interdisciplinary Debates on the Universality of Human Rights,” *Nankai Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 5 (2014): 11.

its spirit have found expression on numerous important occasions, as the author summarizes in Table 1.

Table 1: Expression of the Global Civilization Initiative and Its Spirit on Selected Key Occasions

Date	Event	Summary	Participation and responses of different parties
March 15, 2023	At the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, Xi Jinping, for the first time, proposed the Global Civilization Initiative.	Xi Jinping put forward the Global Civilization Initiative for the first time, advocating respect for the diversity of civilizations, the promotion of the common values of humanity, the strengthening of exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, and opposition to the notions of civilizational superiority and civilizational conflict.	Representatives of political parties and organizations from more than 150 countries participated online, and party and government representatives from many developing countries responded positively.
August 23, 2023	At the 15 th BRICS Summit, Xi Jinping delivered an important speech entitled “ <i>Seeking Development Through Solidarity and Cooperation and Shouldering Our Responsibility for Peace.</i> ”	Xi Jinping pointed out that it is necessary to “strengthen people-to-people exchanges and promote mutual learning among civilizations,” that “human history will not end with one single civilization or one single system”, and that it is essential to “advocate peaceful coexistence and harmonious co-prosperity among different civilizations.” ⁴⁸	Leaders of many countries expressed resonance, and the <i>Johannesburg Declaration of the 15th BRICS Summit</i> was adopted, expressing the commitment to “strengthen inclusive multilateralism.”
June 7, 2024	The 78 th session of the United Nations	The resolution affirms that all achievements of	More than 80 countries supported

⁴⁸ Xi Jinping, “Seeking Development Through Solidarity and Cooperation and Shouldering Our Responsibility for Peace — Speech at the 15th BRICS Summit,” *Guangming Daily*, August 24, 2023, 2.

	General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution proposed by China to establish the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations. ⁴⁹	civilizations are the common heritage of humanity, advocates respect for the diversity of civilizations, highlights the important role of dialogue among civilizations in maintaining world peace, promoting common development, enhancing human well-being, and advancing shared progress, calls for equal dialogue and mutual respect among different civilizations, and decides to designate June 10 as the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations.	the resolution as co-sponsors, and the United Nations issued a press release and conducted extensive publicity.
June 9, 2024	The Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations hosted the first global thematic event for the “International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations” at UN Headquarters in New York.	The event consisted of three parts: a thematic dialogue session, an exhibition of a long scroll on exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, and an artistic performance entitled “Dialogue among Civilizations Across Mountains and Seas.”	More than 1,000 participants — including senior UN officials, permanent representatives and diplomats to the United Nations, as well as members of various sectors in New York — attended the event and expressed support for the platform for dialogue among civilizations.
October 24, 2024	At the BRICS Plus Leaders’ Dialogue, Xi Jinping delivered an	He emphasized the need to uphold multilateralism, promote the building of	Leaders from many countries within the “BRICS Plus”

⁴⁹ 78th United Nations General Assembly, “Implementation of the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace,” A/78/L.75, April 1, 2024.

	important speech entitled “ <i>Pooling the Strength of the Global South to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.</i> ”	an open and inclusive relationship among civilizations characterized by mutual learning, and pointed out that the Global Civilization Initiative is an important Chinese proposal for addressing global instability and uncertainty and for mitigating the risks of civilizational conflict.	framework expressed their support, noting that the initiative provides a new platform and new direction for advancing global multipolarity, cultural diversity, and exchanges and cooperation among civilizations.
February 18, 2025	As the rotating president of the United Nations Security Council for that month, China proposed that the Council hold a high-level meeting on “Practicing Multilateralism and Reforming and Improving Global Governance.”	In his remarks, Foreign Minister Wang Yi referred to the Global Civilization Initiative and emphasized that reforming the global governance structure should pay attention to such principles as the equality of civilizations and mutual respect among cultures.	Representatives of many countries echoed these ideas in their responses, citing language related to the Global Civilization Initiative, reflecting that it has gradually become part of the international discursive repertoire.

As the originator and active practitioner of the Global Civilization Initiative, China has established it as an important platform for communicating China’s human rights stories to the world, systematically integrating its core concepts into the entire process of national governance and human rights institutional construction, and promoting the formation of a civilizational expression of human rights with Chinese characteristics. In this context, the Initiative carries a value framework for international communication and serves as a cultural fulcrum and diplomatic channel for the continuous generation and reshaping of Chinese human rights civilization. Chinese human rights civilization is gradually constructing a three-dimensional practical structure supported by institutional guarantees, civilizational communication, and technological adaptation. Confronting new issues such as digital governance and technological human rights, China continuously advances the institutionalized practice of data rights, platform responsibilities, and algorithmic ethics. Together, these elements outline a practical landscape of Chinese human rights civilization, demonstrating China’s unique contribution to global human rights governance and highlighting the theoretical vitality and capacity for institutional innovation of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

A. Jointly building a more just and reasonable international human rights system

“Civilizational coexistence requires the spirit of harmony in diversity.”⁵⁰ The motto proposed by Mr. Fei Xiaotong — “Appreciate one’s own beauty, appreciate that of others, share the beauty together, and achieve great harmony in the world” — is regarded as a guiding principle for handling relations between different cultures. The exchange, dialogue, and harmonious coexistence of different civilizations inject spiritual momentum into the building of a community with a shared future for mankind: not by replacing one system or civilization with another, but by promoting countries with different systems, cultures, and levels of development to achieve shared interests, rights, and responsibilities.⁵¹ This is an exquisite expression of civilizational coexistence within Chinese culture and provides an Oriental civilizational philosophy for the formation of a global human rights consensus.

China consistently upholds the international order centered on the United Nations. The civilizational concept of “sharing the beauty together” and the global initiative of a “community with a shared future for mankind” are highly aligned in their value orientations, together constituting an important ideological pillar of Chinese human rights civilization and forming part of China’s independent human rights theoretical system. “Sharing the beauty together” emphasizes mutual appreciation and co-prosperity amidst diversity, while the “community with a shared future for mankind” further proposes that global affairs should be conducted on the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits — breaking zero-sum thinking in pursuit of the overall well-being of humanity. This global governance logic, extended from mutual learning among civilizations, endows the human rights consensus with a more stable cultural and moral foundation, which serves as the very bedrock of a more just and reasonable international human rights system.

In the future landscape of global human rights governance, “sharing the beauty together” provides spiritual guidance for civilizational coexistence, the “community with a shared future for mankind” provides a world blueprint for institutional synergy, and Chinese human rights practice is the concrete expression of their convergence. These three dimensions will jointly act upon the reform and co-construction of the international human rights system. Only by deepening consensus on the basis of mutual learning among civilizations can humanity truly step out of the shadow of institutional confrontation and move toward a new global human rights order that is people-centered and development-oriented. In this process, China should continue to deploy cultural confidence, institutional self-awareness, and a global vision to promote the transition of human rights concepts from national practice to international public goods. It should embody the civilizational logic of “symbiosis and mutual progress” in institutional construction and realize the human rights vision of “harmony in diversity” in global governance — providing vital Oriental wisdom and

⁵⁰ Xi Jinping, *On Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind* (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 2018), 256.

⁵¹ He Yin, “Building International Consensus to Promote Human Progress,” *People’s Daily*, October 1, 2023, 3.

Chinese solutions for a more just and reasonable international human rights system.

B. Consolidating foundational theories of human rights in digital transformation

Digital transformation is a significant variable amid the profound changes unseen in a century and a new challenge facing global human rights governance. How to carry out human rights governance in the digital era has become a key arena for testing the adaptability and theoretical vitality of a country's human rights system. To address the human rights questions of the digital age, it is necessary to accelerate the construction of a foundational theory of digital human rights centered on human subjectivity, sovereign security, and open communication, thereby consolidating the modern foundations of Chinese human rights civilization.

In the digital era, security comes first. Confronting practical challenges such as cross-border data flows, platform capital control, and constrained sovereignty in cyberspace, it is essential to fortify the bottom line of national security at the institutional level, safeguard the digital sovereignty system, strengthen the legal framework for personal information protection, and enhance the country's normative and discursive capacity in digital space. National sovereignty is not a barrier to digital technology but the institutional foundation for the legitimacy of digital human rights. In this process, high vigilance must be maintained against the erosion of China's institutional independence by "technological hegemony," preventing Western countries from interfering in the internal affairs of other nations and reshaping rules and order under the guise of human rights issues.

Human dignity cannot be reduced to algorithmic outputs, nor should human value be subordinated to platform logic. Technology should serve the realization of human freedom, and platforms should protect fundamental human rights, while the challenges and tensions introduced by the digital age must also be squarely confronted. Human rights theory in the new era should actively respond to the problem of human alienation under conditions of digital existence, strengthen theoretical protections for human dignity, freedom, and development opportunities, and promote the incorporation of emerging rights concepts such as algorithmic justice and digital equity into the Chinese human rights framework, thereby better serving the cause of human liberation.

The human rights cause is fundamentally people-oriented and concerns the concrete well-being of every individual. Containment is not a sustainable strategy; only by following the trend and providing proper guidance can initiative be seized and consensus achieved within complex and diverse digital contexts, better responding to the contemporary demands of global civilizational dialogue. While safeguarding national sovereignty and ideological security, attention should also be given to promoting free and regularized exchanges in the human rights field, driving the construction of smoother, warmer, and more responsive channels for interaction between government and public, and gradually transforming "human rights" from a sensitive topic in public discourse into a concept understood, engaged with, and embraced by ordinary people.

C. Better telling China's human rights stories in international exchanges

Since the proposal of the Global Civilization Initiative, China has placed greater emphasis on promoting human rights consensus through mutual learning among civilizations and responding to discourse biases under Western dominance through equal dialogue. It strives to transform the “people-centered” human rights concept into a Chinese narrative that is understandable, communicable, and relatable, presenting a credible, respectable, and endearing image of China’s human rights record. To achieve this goal, concerted efforts are needed along three dimensions — institutional construction, people-to-people exchanges, and communication capabilities — to drive Chinese human rights diplomacy to go deeper and more practical, making China’s human rights stories increasingly compelling and thereby promoting the evolution of global human rights governance in a more just and reasonable direction.

Expanding “home-field diplomacy” through platform mechanisms and building new carriers for civilizational dialogue and mutual learning. To deepen human rights diplomacy, the priority lies in constructing dialogue platforms and cooperation mechanisms with international influence. Relying on institutional platforms such as the South-South Human Rights Forum and the China-Europe Seminar on Human Rights, China’s home-field diplomacy aims to build an open, inclusive, and mutually learning international human rights network. Looking ahead, further consideration could be given to establishing multilateral platforms to realize civilizational exchange at the institutional level and expand new spaces for human rights discourse. By articulating the logic behind the system and presenting data that reflects the people’s tangible sense of gain, China’s human rights stories can be embedded into the world’s human rights discourse, realizing the transition from value participant to standard contributor.

Consolidating the “people-to-people bond” through people-to-people exchanges and activating the momentum of humanistic communication through multi-party participation. The appeal of China’s human rights concepts stems from institutional advantages, and also from an authentic commitment to improving people’s lives and enhancing their sense of happiness — a commitment that can only become visible, comprehensible, and credible to the international community through extensive and in-depth people-to-people exchanges and social interactions. In recent years, Chinese universities, research institutions, and social organizations have made positive strides in international human rights exchanges, but compared with mainstream international human rights organizations, the communication architecture still needs strengthening. In the future, high-level universities, think tanks, and industry organizations should be further encouraged to actively go global and conduct diverse forms of people-to-people exchange on a wide range of topics. Equal importance should also be placed on inviting in and going global, with regular invitations extended to international human rights scholars, practitioners, and institutional representatives to visit China, enabling the outside world to more authentically perceive China’s human rights achievements, institutional logic, and civilizational foundations, thereby dismantling entrenched Western stereotypes and biases.

Strengthening “strategic communication” through talent systems and comprehensively enhancing the professional expressive capabilities of China’s human rights discourse. Better telling China’s human rights stories ultimately depends on the role of people as the driving subject. At present, China still lacks a high-caliber, composite talent pool in the field of human rights diplomacy that simultaneously possesses literacy in international rules, a deep understanding of China’s national conditions, and global communication capabilities. To this end, a human rights communication talent cultivation system grounded in the criteria of political commitment, professional expression, and international experience should be accelerated, building a national human rights communication team that can, will, and does tell the stories well. On one hand, existing human rights research centers, university departments, and international communication platforms could be leveraged to establish a Global Human Rights Communication Talent Plan, encouraging young scholars to intern, exchange, and serve in the UN Human Rights Council, international organizations, and transnational forums. On the other hand, the interdisciplinary integration of human rights studies with international communication, foreign languages, and international relations should be advanced. As a discipline whose essence lies in respecting, protecting, and developing people, human rights studies itself possesses distinct multidimensional and interdisciplinary attributes⁵² — building its theoretical foundation upon the core value of the person while remaining closely intertwined with politics, law, communication, and philosophy. A composite talent structure with theoretical grounding, technical competence, and expressive capability should gradually take shape.

China is leveraging the construction of multilateral platforms, the expansion of people-to-people networks, and the strengthening of talent support to drive human rights issues from value confrontation toward dialogue and cooperation, and from institutional fragmentation toward mutual learning among civilizations, effectively telling China’s human rights stories. China consistently upholds the implementation of the UN *Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations*, participating in global human rights governance as a responsible major country. In the future, institutional human rights cooperation platforms should be continuously consolidated, people-to-people interactions and cross-cultural communication deepened, and high-quality human rights communication and research teams built — promoting Chinese solutions in the human rights field to truly go global, be heard, and stand firm.

Conclusion: The Practical Significance and Theoretical Imagination of Chinese-style Human Rights Civilization

The Global Civilization Initiative is deeply rooted in the great practice of the new path of Chinese modernization and emerged in timely response to the profound changes unseen in a century. It marks China’s gradual transition from participant and

⁵² He Zhipeng and Yu Runtian, “Human Rights Studies: Disciplinary Connotations, Development Directions and Exploratory Experience,” *Chinese Journal of Human Rights* 4 (2023): 1.

contributor to leader and builder in the dialogue among human civilizations and in global human rights governance. Under the value guidance of the Initiative, Chinese human rights civilization has taken root; relying on indigenous cultural resources and governance experience, it advances the reconstruction of the global human rights value system and has forged an institutional path of mutual learning among civilizations. This path transcends the mainstream Western-centric paradigm and outlines a Chinese solution for the modernization of human rights construction. It represents a systemic challenge to and theoretical reconstruction of traditional cognitive paradigms in international relations, as well as an important original contribution to China's independent human rights theoretical system. In the future, the construction of Chinese human rights civilization and the cause of human rights protection under the guidance of the Global Civilization Initiative will surely continue to deepen through human rights practice, demonstrating ever greater theoretical imagination.

(Translated by *CHEN Feng*)