

The Chinese Civilizing Process: Eliasian Thought as an Effective
Analytical Tool for the Chinese Cultural Context

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract:

This thesis is an effort to apply Elias's thinking on social development to the Chinese social situation. At first glance his account of the civilizing process would appear incompatible with this context, in that, after state formation with the Qin and Han dynasties beginning in 221 BC, Chinese civilization remained both stable and highly traditional for well over two millennia. It is argued, however, that closer scrutiny reveals a process that was merely interrupted for a considerable period. The traditional system relied upon a symbiotic relationship between local society and the centre whereby the centre remained relatively small and aloof, not interfering with local social relations, as long as local society provided the required taxes and labour. In this situation the state had the monopolies of both violence and taxation that Elias would look for, but left local society to its own devices primarily because it was already pacified. This self-reinforcing system was enshrined and codified in the Confucian canon over the course of centuries from the Han dynasty. Central control of the distribution of resources was eventually required to re-start the Chinese civilizing process, for this was the mechanism through which the local social structure would finally be altered. This only happened within the past century as the Chinese people struggled to grapple with their own 'backwardness' in the face of incessant Western and Japanese incursions. At this point the old system was toppled and replaced by progressively more aggressive central governments who saw as their most important task the destruction of the traditional social order in the interest of modernization. As the Chinese state consciously and forcibly took control of the distribution of resources at all levels of society, traditional social relations were stretched and warped, and the Chinese civilizing process re-

commenced its long-stalled march toward modernization. This has been evidenced both by the dramatic growth in mobility and the rapidly extending chains of interdependence in the form of *guanxi* connections primarily during the Post-Opening period after 1978.

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