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From *putonghua* 普通话 to *putonghua* 普通化: civilised citizen and vulgar minorities

By Thomas Boutonnet (Institute for Transtextual and Transcultural Studies)

(Powerpoint Slide 1) Hello everyone and thank you for being here on a Saturday morning. I would like to expose today a topic I am working on. My speech will focus on the Chinese word *wenming*, (Powerpoint Slide 2) its meaning in political propaganda, and its possible translation in English. But it is a work still in progress, which I will continue after my thesis, so I hope the audience will spare the modest PHD student I am, and I'm open to any remarks, critics or suggestions whatsoever regarding this work.

(Powerpoint Slide 3)

The word *wenming* is routinely used in Chinese political or civic propaganda nowadays, as we can see in those few posters or billboards I've taken in picture of in August 2006 in Beijing.

But what does *wenming* mean ?

In Chinese/English dictionaries, the word *wenming* is translated by "culture", (Powerpoint Slide 4) and more often by "civilisation" as a noun; and "civilised" or "polite" as an adjective. But is this translation "correct" and does it help us to understand what *wenming* implies in Chinese contemporary political propaganda ? It's a complex question and I won't have any definitive answer in such a short time here, but I would like to try to propose some potential interpretation.

Since we don't know yet what the word *wenming* implies, we can have first an idea of what the English word "civilisation" means.

"Civilisation" is quite a complex word, communally accepted as the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced; it can also be equivalent to society, culture, and way of life of a particular area; and eventually, the comfort and convenience of modern life, regarded as available in towns and cities. These are regular definitions and yet almost all these terms, "culture", "society" and "development" are very questionable and would need further explanation and definition, since they are strongly linked to power, domination and politics. "Civilisation" remains an elusive word, which meaning is filled by the very same persons who are using it, for it is involving binary opposition, between something supposedly late or minor and something supposedly advanced. "Civilisation"

referred to urban standards of life in opposition to countryside, when social and cultural elite, and domination structure were centralised in cities. It referred to so called modernity and progress when West colonization brought so called "civilisation" to people seen as "primitive" and "uncivilised". It referred also to "evangelisation" in opposition to paganism when Jesuits came for instance, just to remind "Les Immémoriaux" of Victor Segalen, to pacific islands to eradicate local cultures and beliefs. Well, civilisation is a modelling process, in an evolutionist point of view, supposed to bring to a superior and better stage.

A brief etymological approach, appears to be very interesting too. From the Latin word *civis*, (Powerpoint Slide 5) for citizen, and from its derivatives, as *civilis*, or *civitas*, the city, comes a lot of key words in English: civilisation, civilised, citizen, civilian, civic, civil, civility. When citizen refers to a member of a community entitled to participate to the political organisation of this community, through rights and duties, civil can refer to both what is relating to ordinary citizens, as distinct from military, and to something or someone courteous or polite. As for civility, regular definition indicates politeness, or individual act or a manner of behaving which conforms to social conventions of propriety. And the word civilised is currently used to qualify someone well-mannered and polite. In this perspective, civilisation can also be interpreted as the process to make something civil, therefore polite, or to bring something to civility, or politeness

Well, let's keep this in mind and go back to the Chinese word *wenming*

The word *wenming* has a complex history too, object of a very interesting upcoming work by Florent Villard. It is composed of two characters, *wen*, (Powerpoint Slide 6) which refers, among others, to "writing", "language" and what is "literary", but also to "refined" and "elegant"; and *ming*, which is associated to "bright", "clear" and "obvious". In classical Chinese language, *wenming* meant "clear-sightedness" and "talent". Borrowed by Japan as a translation for the English word "civilisation", the word *wenming* gets linked to westernisation or modernisation, before getting back to China by the end of 19th century. At this period, *wenming* was used for "enlightened", "civilised", opposed to barbarism, and is still a synonym to Western and modernity. In present days of China (Powerpoint Slide 7), Chinese dictionary defines *wenming* as : 1. 文化 *wenhua* which is translated as "culture", and 2. 社会发展较高阶段和具有较高文化的 "relatively high stage of development and high cultural level" which is a definition of civilised for a society. Applied for a person, *wenming* is often translated as "civilised", in the well-mannered acceptance of it. The sentence quoted as example in my

Chinese/English dictionary is 这个人讲话不太文明, translated by "this person's speech is rather vulgar". Well, let's keep this in mind too.

Since the Chinese definition of *wenming* is also problematic, because we still have to know what are *wenhua*, *fazhan* and *gao*, we will then try to understand this word in the context of its political and civic propaganda use.

Wenming, as we supposed, could indeed mean something close to "civilized", "well-mannered", when we see this poster from the City Comity in charge of establishing a Spiritual *wenming* in the city of Changzhou (near Shanghai).

(Powerpoint Slide 8)

As we can see, these are advices or orders to make the daily life better in the community, and obviously, our children are judging us, and therefore will thank us to make a better city for them. So *wenming* is close to well-mannered and educated, and appears to be an educating concept.

But the range of meanings of the word *wenming* is wider. This other poster appears to be different from the first one,

(Powerpoint Slides 9 and 10)

In the middle of the 1990s, China economic system is switching to a so called socialist market economy and shutting down state owned industry, which led to critical social issues, massive unemployment and made millions of jobless peasants migrate to big cities to become those migrant workers called *mingong*. These *waidiren*, "outsiders", suffered, and are still suffering, from discrimination, since they are associated to the evil other, which echoes to the scapegoat speech of Professor Petterson this Thursday, while they are working in tiring and awful conditions building the so called Chinese economic miracle. In this period China's big cities (1996 for Beijing) established a formal definition of how a model citizen, a *wenming* resident of the city, should behave. As Anne-Marie Broudehoux noticed, this golden list appeared everywhere in Beijing, on construction sites, near bus stops, and along major streets, and constitutes an obvious attempt to force newcomers to the city to comply to norms of civility, and conveys a clear picture of the ideal citizen.

This may actually have no impact on people's behaviour, since Chinese are getting used to these propaganda posters and many people may no longer notice them, as they became part of the urban landscape, but I'm not looking for the impact of the concept *wenming*, I'm looking for what this concept implies.

As you can see, *wenming* here suggests more than good manners and politeness as we use to understand them. It is actually a massive set of rules and conventions one has to follow to be a good citizen. It is even more invasive than the word "civilised" since this pledge stipulates to "love the motherland and maintain social stability". The *wenming* agreement here is definitely shaping a way of life, by cornering every aspect of it, from political to social appearance, and including interpersonal relations, work, family, education, ethics, etc. *Wenmin* appears to be a regulating concept.

This pledge has to be related with an even more massive civic campaign, led in 2001, when Chinese government decided to take steps to enforce an ideal citizen's morality. This programme is called, 公民道德建设实施纲要, "program to build and implement morality for citizens". In this document, China admits that 20 years of reforms may have brought economic growth in China, but also led to many social issues, as corruption, poverty, inequity, which this program linked to a bad or wrong morality, and blurred perception of what is good or bad (Powerpoint Slide 11). In order to resolve these issues, this program proposes to remind Chinese people the difference between good and evil. To fight against individualism, hedonism, and greediness for instance, civic campaigns were launched (street posters and billboard, television, work sessions in companies, studying sessions at school etc) to promote good morality, truthfulness, loyalty, and friendship.

(Powerpoint Slide 12)

This kind of regulation can be found in several major cities in China, as in Shanghai for example, where the city comity in charge of the construction of spiritual *wenming* (*jingshen wenming*) published a "Seven edifications campaign", with a similar content, where people are asked to "build a city ruled by law, politeness, trust and friendship, a healthy and educated city and where environment is protected". This picture was taken in September 2006. And then, few days after, the mayor of Shanghai and Secretary of Communist Party for Shanghai, Chen Liangyu, was dismissed for what is one of the biggest corruption scandal of the decade, involving, among others, the misappropriation of more than 3 billions of Chinese RMB from the retirement funds of the city of Shanghai.

As we saw, *wenming* is not only implying good manners and good behaviour, it is also used to ascertain how to behave with others, in order to building a harmonious society, which is the official goal of president Hu Jintao. *Wenming* implies moral notions.

But yet, we can still find other meanings to the concept *wenming*

(Powerpoint Slides 13, 14 and 15)

Those are signboards we can find at Shanghai bus stations. Under the description of the bus line, we can see slogans on green colour boards. We may find the four first ones quite easy to understand, full of reasonable advices and orders to behave properly, as a civilized, well mannered person would do. We have already seen those in the other posters. But what about the last injunction?

(Powerpoint Slide 16)

In Shanghai, the common language is *shanghainese*, spoken by barely 80 millions of people. Where mandarin, or *putonghua*, is officially used everywhere in China territory, many regions or localities are still using their own language, officially called dialects or *fangyan*. So what can we think about this injunction to speak mandarin we can find in the same spots ? Bourdieu explained that the constitution of state create the conditions for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language, becoming a new linguistic norm. But still, it does not really explained how speaking *shanghainese* can be put at the same level as "garbage disposal" or "gross words"!

So definitely, *wenming* is not only a matter of good manners. It implies also a hegemonic pattern, a leading model of what a *wenming* person should be. As for the *shanghainese* people, with their minor language, they should not only learn the common language, as many inhabitants of Hong-Kong have to do since 1997, or many so called ethnic minorities "shaoshu minzu", but they should also speak mandarin. (Powerpoint Slide 17) This is not only about speaking the common language (*putonghua*), it's also about being common, it's a process about being common (*putonghua*).

So *wenming* is about levelling the cultural, at least the linguistic diversity. It's about polishing the diversity so it's becoming common. *Wenming* is a controlling concept.

As for a conclusion, let's go back to Beijing, where great decisions were taken in the name of *wenming*.

Anne-Marie Broudehoux again, wrote this very interesting monography *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing*. She explained that, in September 1999, one month before the beginning of the October 1 festivities for the People's Republic of China's fifty-year-anniversary, Beijing authorities expelled thousands of illegal residents in just one week. The campaign, called the "Three without", was aimed at those without official documents, without legal residence permits, and without permanent income. By October, 300,000 illegal residents had reportedly been expelled from the city in one of the largest eviction campaigns in years. Broudehoux explained (I quote) (Powerpoint Slide 18) « *To enhance the capital's human environment and enforce social order, image construction efforts therefore included a series of social reform and public education campaigns which aimed to raise the citizenry to an acceptable level of sophistication. Actions were also taken to hide the most visible manifestations of the reform's failure to benefit all members of Chinese society. Signs of poverty and backwardness, or any visual blight which may question the success of the socialist market economy, were carefully camouflaged.* »

And this is where the word *wenming* begins to be interesting. Let's sum up: *wenming* is not only about good manners, appropriate social behaviour; it's also about following a pattern of stipulations that is leading to an ideal and perfect citizen life. For which, one should get rid of his bad minor habits like speaking *shanghai*, and when it is required, cities, to be *wenming*, need also to get rid of its bad habits like poverty, migrants and homeless people, to show the bright side of society. So *wenming* is also a spectacle, *wenming*, it's also about showing something *wenming*.

In the name of *wenming*, many migrant workers were kindly asked to leave Beijing during Olympic games, when all the construction fields were closed to prevent air pollution. To present a smooth appearance during the Olympic games, Beijing taxi drivers were asked to be perfectly shaved, Beijing people were asked not to show their bellies to fresh air during the heat of the summer when wearing a shirt is really unbearable. In the name of *wenming*, the poor and the dirty had to be hidden to show the smooth and the shiny face of the city and some gay bars were closed during Olympics games.

(Powerpoint Slide 19)

When the old downtown neighborhood Qianmen, a huge part of old Beijing, south of Tian'anmen square, has been destroyed, and thousands of inhabitants expelled to Beijing suburbs, months ago,

reasons exposed by the Mayor were not that the city needed to sell the place for realtors to build malls and offices and therefore to bring lot of money and currencies for Beijing government, but because the *hutong* and *siheyuan* were too old and decrepit, and therefore not *wenming* at all.

As we saw, *wenming* is a very complex and polymorphic word. But it seems to imply the promotion for a smooth, polished appearance, where poverty has to be hidden, so called "minor" behaviours to be denied, and a model pattern has to be followed. As we saw, *wenming* involves morality, and is used to educate and to regulate. (Powerpoint Slide 20) *Wenming* is a controlling concept in an era of spectacle.

So, let's try to answer my very first question: is it appropriate to translate *wenming* by "civilisation", or "civilised"?

Well, as for "civilisation", if we define "civilisation" as a levelling process of unification, I would say yes. As for "civilized" and "polite", since English words "politeness", "polite" and "polish" are all sharing the same etymological origin, the latin word *polire*, for *make smooth*, I would say yes, *wenming* means to "be polite", that is to say "be polished". This is even more obvious in French where there is only one word for the two meanings: "poli", for "polite" and "polished"

(Powerpoint Slide 21) In the end of 19th century, the *ming* of *wenming* meant "shiny" and "bright" because "enlightenment".

Now, it still means "bright", but only because diversity gets so polished that it become smooth and bright.